



The Underground
The Lost Fae Princess
Volume 1

The Underground Series: The Lost Fae Princess Volume 1 © 2017-20
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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Also by Erin Bedford](#)

[CHASING RABBITS](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[CHASING CATS](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[CHASING PRINCES](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[CHASING SHADOWS](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Chasing Heart](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[About the Author](#)

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The Underground Series

[Chasing Rabbits](#)

[Chasing Cats](#)

[Chasing Princes](#)

[Chasing Shadows](#)

[Chasing Hearts](#)

[The Crimes of Alice](#)

[Hatter's Heart](#)

[Cheshire's Smile](#)

The Mary Wiles Chronicles

[Marked by Hell](#)

[Bound by Hell](#)

[Deceived by Hell](#)

[Tempted by Hell](#)

Starcrossed Dragons

[Riding Lightning](#)

[Grinding Frost](#)

[Swallowing Fire](#)

[Pounding Earth](#)

The Crimson Fold

[Until Midnight](#)

[Until Dawn](#)

[Until Sunset](#)

Curse of the Fairy Tales

[Rapunzel Untamed](#)

[Rapunzel Unveiled](#)

[Rapunzel Unchained](#)

[Her Angels](#)

[Heaven's Embrace](#)

[Heaven's A Beach](#)

[Heaven's Most Wanted](#)

[House of Durand](#)

[Indebted to the Vampires](#)

[Wanted by the Vampires](#)

Protected by the Vampires
Embrace of the Vampires
Tempted by the Butler
Loved by the Vampires
Huntress of the Vampires
Academy of Witches
Witching On A Star
As You Witch
Witch You Were Here
Just Witch It
Summer Witchin'
Children of the Fallen
Death In Her Eyes
Fire In Her Blood
House of Van Helsing
Her Cross To Bear
Fairy Tale Bad Boys
Beauty and the Hunter
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Vampire CEO

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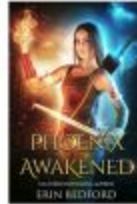
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CHASING RABBITS



Chapter 1

The Chase

BRANDI BRIDGERS WAS a bitch in high school, and as I watched her sitting behind her desk with her ‘holier-than-thou’ attitude and her stylishly bobbed blonde hair, she gave me little hope she had changed. I rolled my eyes as she adjusted her neck-high white blouse. Her lips pressed together in a thin line as she scanned over my credentials. My resume dangled in her hand like it was something she found at the bottom of her drain.

“...come home.”

My eyes widened, snapping up to look at Brandi. “What did you say?”

Brandi’s lips tilted in a frown at my question. “I said, I’m not surprised you came home after all this time. Almost everyone comes home eventually. Really, Katherine, this is an interview, you really should be paying more attention.”

“Sorry,” I grumbled, too fixated on what I thought I’d heard. *Come home*. The words had plagued me for over a year now.

It started shortly after my twenty-first birthday. At first it was a whisper in a dream that I’d brushed off as being homesick, but then it bled into my waking life. I’d hear it in the breeze, or in my economics class. One time I swore my own reflection said it back to me. I had also been drunk out of my mind at the time, but it was hard to believe they were all coincidences.

So, here I was, back in my hometown, and the words were still taunting me. I was home. I couldn’t get any more home than Iowa. I was even looking for a job. Not that I had high hopes for this interview, but with an English Literature Degree, there weren’t many options available. I learned that painful truth back in New York; I should have been an accountant.

“I see here you were a library assistant in high school.” Brandi’s voice had a high-pitched, ‘bless-your-heart’ tone to it that grated on my nerves.

“Yes, Brandi. We went to high school together, you already know that.” I crossed my arms over my black silk blouse, careful not to catch my thick copper hair on the buttons of my sleeves. My choice to wear a black

shirt over a white one, like my mother had suggested helped to keep me from jumping over the desk to wring her grace's little neck. I didn't want to match Brandi in any way, shape, or form.

Brandi's brown eyes peeked around the side of the piece of paper, which held my meager life experience, bare to her over-accentuated eyes. "Katherine, as I told you before, I won't let our history together affect my judgment. No matter how offensive." She sniffed as her gaze returned to the paper as if her thinly veiled reference to my previous transgressions didn't affect her.

Like I had ever given two shits about what she thought.

Years ago, when I was an angry teen rebel full of sarcasm and black nail polish, I had the displeasure of going to school with Brandi and her swarm of over-medicated vultures. While everyone else in our class was trying to make as many memories as possible, I had spent the majority of it applying to every coast school I could afford. No place was far enough away from them.

So, when the miraculous day came and I got my acceptance letter to New York University, I didn't waste any time with long goodbyes. I gave Iowa a middle finger salute and made my way out of town screaming 'fuck you' to every innocent bystander I saw on my way down Broadway.

I probably should have been more selective of my targets, but how was I to know I would be sitting in an interview with one of the few people who actually deserved it?

My eyes narrowed at my captor, and I growled out, "Kat."

"What?" Brandi did not offer me her eyes this time.

"I like to be called Kat, which you also know."

For more than the first time – hell it was more like the hundredth time – I regretted coming to the interview. I would have turned tail and ran the moment I saw her, but my mother had gotten me the interview. If I left without even giving myself the chance to fail, I would never hear the end of it. I had to sit and swallow the half-assed insults to my person and abilities and hope to whatever deity was listening that I didn't get the job.

"Of course." Her voice still held a sickly sweet tone. "I'll make a note of it in your file." Her neatly manicured fingers gripped her pen as she scribbled onto a notepad.

I doubted she was actually making a note of it. It was probably a reminder to get her roots bleached again, or to tell the vultures about how

Katherine Nottingham had sloppily begged for a job. I am sure they would all have a good laugh over their next mani-pedi excursion.

“Well.” She gave an exaggerated sigh. “You don’t really have the qualifications we are looking for in a librarian. An English Literature degree is all fine and dandy, but you never learned the Dewey Decimal System.”

“I completely understand, I will just—” I stood up, happy for the interview to finally be over.

“But.” Her tone stopped me. “Your mother is a good friend of ours, and she contributes quite a bit to the funding of this town’s community. It would be rash, not to mention unchristian like, to toss you out into the cold when you have been brave enough to come back to our – what was it you called this town?” She paused, pretending as if it were not on the tip of her tongue. “A prehistoric cesspool that didn’t deserve the pavement it was built on?”

Why could she remember a nonsensical insult stated under the influence, but she couldn’t remember I liked being called Kat?

My brow furrowed at her words. “So, I got the job?”

“You’ve got the job!” Brandi threw her hands up as she hopped out of her seat and enveloped me in a tight embrace.

My body tensed at the sudden intrusion to my personal space. She dwarfed me in her three-inch heels. My nose went smack to the middle of her neck where it was assaulted by her top-shelf perfume.

I had gotten the job. How the hell had that happened? I hadn’t been pleasant. Hell, I had been snarky at best. I knew she didn’t want me on her staff any more than I wanted to be there, but money talked, and if there is one thing my family had going for them it was money.

“Yay.” I gave a small, half-hearted response.

“Let me introduce you to our team!” Brandi finally let me go and led me out to the main circulation desk where the other employees were waiting.

The ‘team,’ as she called it, consisted of two people. Two. And they seemed to have as much enthusiasm for Brandi’s leadership as I did in being there. Yay just about covered it.

“This is David.” Brandi pointed at a guy about my age who gave me a shy smile and then a nervous cough at Brandi’s overshadowing presence.

“He does most of the shelving, but he also works the desk with Mrs. Jenkins here.”

Mrs. Jenkins was an elderly lady. She had dark-brown skin that contrasted nicely with the whitest hair I had ever seen. That kind of white hair wasn't seen in the city if it didn't come out of a box or a salon. I must have been staring, because the old woman's eyes narrowed into a glare.

“You got a problem?” Her voice was raspy as if she had smoked too much.

“Only on days that end with y.” I gave a half smile at my own joke, and then frowned when her brow furrowed further before she barked out a laugh causing David and Brandi to jump.

“That's nice. I think we are going to get along just fine.” She turned a sharp eye to Brandi. “I half expected another one of those prissy little chits you keep hiring.” She glanced over at me with a crooked smile. “Couldn't stand them, with all their ‘rules are rules’ nonsense. Bah. Brandi here knows what's what.”

“Yes, well,” Brandi began, she seemed nervous with Mrs. Jenkins's attention on her. “We decided to take a chance and go a different direction this time.”

The fact that the old lady ruffled Miss Prim and Proper's feathers made me instantly like her. At least someone in this place had a sense of humor. I needed some humor in my life.

Come home, the voice had said. I was home. So why was I still feeling like I had somewhere to be?



A WEEK LATER AND NOTHING extraordinary had happened. I went about my mediocre life and the ever-present words that followed me were deafeningly silent. I was afraid to let my guard down, not that my mother would let that happen.

I found myself having my usual argument with my mother over my social life, or rather, the lack of a social life, of which I had become so proud. We had already gone over everything new in her life, so of course she had to start in on mine. My hands were busy washing dishes with anal-retentive detail as my mother harped in my ear.

"Katherine, I just don't understand why you won't at least have dinner with Kevin. He's a nice boy, and he has a job!" My mother's exasperated voice grated on my ear as I held my cell phone between my shoulder and face.

"Because, Mom, I don't want or need a boyfriend. I am fine on my own."

I surveyed the dish I was cleaning, making sure all the food had been rinsed off before putting it in the dishwasher. Nothing got on my nerves more than food stuck to a plate, but at the moment, my mother was riding in at a close second.

"Oh, yes, a twenty-two-year-old woman all alone in that big house—in the middle of nowhere—is completely fine."

I rolled my eyes at the sarcasm in her voice.

"It's Iowa, Mom. The whole state is practically in the middle of nowhere." I shoved the sleeves of my gray, NYU sweatshirt back up over my elbows and switched the phone to my other shoulder. "Besides, Crescent is only a few minutes outside of town and Grandma needs someone to take care of her house while she's off playing in Florida."

"And she told you you could sell it and put it toward a house in town. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be independent, Katherine, but being a hermit is drawing the line. Isn't being a librarian seclusion enough for you?"

A snort left my nose before I could stop it. The fact that she disapproved of the very job she pulled strings to get me was astounding. Though, it shouldn't have been surprising, she was always the one who brought up her disapproval of my career choices.

She had been one of the ones who had griped at me to pick a sensible major, like accounting or, God forbid, political science. She never understood my love for the English language. I wanted to be an editor, or maybe even a writer. If I could ever buckle down and write something worth reading.

Lately, though, it seemed like I couldn't do anything right. This was probably due to my sister, Linda, also known as Miss Fucking Perfect, who was getting married this month. My mom had it in her head that I needed to find a man and be more social, or I would be doomed to be an old maid by thirty.

"You don't want to still be marking single when you're thirty do you?"

I should have bought a Powerball with how right I was.

There were worse things out there than being single at thirty. I could be dying of cancer or be a drug addict. No, my mother cared more about how my being single reflected on her.

"I'm not secluded at the library," I argued, ignoring her question completely. "Plenty of people are in and out every day. Plus, there are other workers there, not just me. Mrs. Jenkins works there, and so does David."

"Ha! Hardly suitable companionship for a girl your age. A senile old lady who has probably been there since the library opened, and David is more of a hermit than you! Though, if you dated him, at least you'd be dating. And Lord knows you'd never have to worry about him cheating on you. He hardly has the looks to be picky."

David was a nice guy, even if he was not the most attractive. He had a slightly hooked nose and a pudgy build, but after a week of working with him, I found his hesitant smile and soft-spoken ways endearing. If I was looking for someone, and I was not, he had a lot of the qualities I would want. Too bad he was taken.

"I'll make sure to tell his fiancé you think so."

I almost dropped the dish in my hand when she gave an uncharacteristic chortle. "Even that spud has someone! Doesn't that tell you anything, Katherine?"

My knuckles turned white as I gripped the plate in my hands. It started to make a tiny cracking noise, and I put it down. My mother had that effect on me. We would start fighting and she would pick and pick at old wounds until they bled. Sadly, my dishes were always the ones to suffer.

I slammed the dishwasher closed as I took a deep breath. "You know what, Mom? If it will make you happy, I will go out with Kevin, but not this week." I waited for the comment that was sure to come because she wasn't getting her way.

"But if you don't go out this week, you won't have enough prep time to have him be your date to Linda's wedding."

Linda's wedding. Of course, that's what she was worried about. No way would it be about my happiness.

"I'm in the wedding, Mom. The groomsmen assigned to me will be my date." I yanked the hair tie from my copper locks and set to work on tying the messy bun again. "Besides, I'm busy this week."

"Oh? Busy with what? That old garden?" I could almost see her rolling her eyes even though we were on the phone. "You know nothing good ever grows in your grandmother's yard. I should know. I grew up there."

"Yes, the garden, and if you'd bother to come over you would see how great everything is growing. I even have a carrot patch—"

As if knowing I was talking about it, a loud crash came from the backyard signaling my trap had gone off again. Damn rabbits!

"I've got to go."

"But Katherine, what about—"

"I'll talk to you on Sunday at lunch. Love you, bye," I cut in hanging up the phone before she could answer. I dashed to the door, shoved my feet into my sneakers, and took off toward the sound.

I scanned the backyard for any sight of the little thief who had been plaguing me for weeks. I skipped going into the garden. I knew my trap would be empty like it always was and skimmed the trees for any sign of the white devil instead. My forest-green eyes caught sight of a white streak bolting for the woods behind the house. Not wanting to lose him, I took off into the dark.

"Where did you go?"

The green of the trees created a darkened gray, making it hard to see as they blended into their surroundings. The rustling leaves to my left drew my attention just as the dull white streak made for the clearing ahead.

"There you are!"

My sneakers thudded against the ground as I chased after him, and the whispers returned. With each footfall they chanted. *Come home. Come home. Come home.* My heart beat faster in my chest and my bare legs seemed to catch on every single branch I ran past, leaving little scratches all over my skin.

I ignored the stinging in my legs and kept my eyes on the white coat that glared neon in the visible moonlight from the clearing. Though I had a clear view of him, he was still too fast for me to catch. I wasn't in the best of shape, and my short legs could only get me so far.

The wind picked up as I bent over to catch my breath. The words floated on the wind as it whipped bits of hair out of my bun and into my face. I glowered at the single section of blonde that had fallen, its contrast so different from the rest of my copper hair. A birthmark at the nape of my neck had caused the discoloration. I usually kept my hair down to hide it.

The fact that I even let it show at home would cause my mother to start a tirade about how I should just color it.

I didn't really care about it, and probably should have given into her urgings, but I didn't see the logic in buying a box of hair color just for a single section. I wasn't so vain to think the expense was worth it, so it hung freely underneath my hair with none the wiser. Plus, it pissed my mother off, which was reason enough in my book.

Standing up, I noticed the rabbit had stopped next to the little pond my sister and I used to fish at when we were younger. It wasn't a very big pond, and to our dismay, it had more frogs than fish in it. It did have a great little hiding spot. There was a cave where water from the Missouri River trickled into the pond, and sitting right outside the cave, taking his time as he enjoyed my carrots, was the long-eared fiend.

He munched away at one with every confidence he had lost me. I took a moment to try to get the jump on him by moving across the field toward where he was sitting. Luck was not on my side, however, because as soon as I was about to sneak up behind him, he saw my reflection in the pool and panicked. He shoved the carrot into his mouth and darted toward the mouth of the cave.

"Shit."

The rabbit was more trouble than he was worth and a lot smarter than he seemed. I had tried everything to keep him out of my garden. Animal repellent, traps, even wire fencing. It still didn't keep him out. He had somehow even cut a hole in the fence big enough for him to get in and out with my carrots.

No clue how he pulled that one off.

I once mused he was a runaway lab rabbit that the government had been doing experiments on him. As a result, he'd become a superfied genius rabbit. Though, if that were true, nothing short of a high-powered security system was keeping that rabbit out of my carrot patch. So, since I couldn't afford that kind of tech on a librarian's salary, I decided to take him out.

In order to not spook my prey again, I inched my way toward the cave's entrance. It wasn't very big. At ten years old it had been quite easy to go in and out as I pleased, but as a moderately chested grown woman, it was a tight fit.

I tried to be as quiet as possible as I sucked in my stomach. Think thin. I was as thin as a rod, as skinny as a Victoria Secret model. This wasn't making me claustrophobic whatsoever. Finally, I got through the entrance and blinked as my eyes adjusted to the dim lighting in the cavern.

The cave I remembered was usually pretty dark with only a sliver of moonlight coming through the opening, but to my surprise, it was brighter in the cavern than it was outside. As my eyes adjusted to the cave an ominous feeling washed over me. Weird, neon-white painted symbols covered the walls.

What the hell?

My fingers traced one of the symbols, and I realized it was not paint at all. It was as if they were part of the wall itself. I didn't remember them being there the last time my sister and I had ventured into our little hideout. I would remember mysterious nightlights, wouldn't I?

As conspiracy theories started to circle my mind, a sneeze from the back of the cavern reminded me of my purpose. I turned away from the mysterious symbols and moved toward the sound. Every step I took felt heavier than the last, and a chilling thought came to mind—what if something, or someone, was in the cave?

With that disturbing thought, my footsteps became more cautious, and my eyes darted around. No one was going to get the jump on me. I had read enough horror novels to know I was a prime candidate for being abducted or killed by some lunatic with a skin fetish. I really should work on my sense of self-preservation.

More symbols started to appear on the walls the further back I got. In the front of the cavern they had only been on the sides, but as I progressed deeper into the cave, the symbols began to run all along the ceiling and the floor. They were angled in the direction of something in the center of the back of the cavern as if they were being drawn in.

I followed the spiral of symbols until I ended up in front of a basketball-sized hole in the wall. That had definitely not been there before. Turning around in a circle, I searched the walls for any other changes. There was not really anything different, besides the weird nightlights and the hole, and there was no sign of the rabbit anywhere.

I gave the hole a wide berth as I contemplated what to do next. I knew the only exit to the cavern was the one I came through, so the rabbit must have gone through the hole. Then again, I could be in a horrible version of

some mummy story, and the moment I stuck my arm in that thing, it was going to get eaten off.

I wasn't the bravest person. I didn't agree to work in a library just because I loved to read, and I'd admit, a little desperate. It was quiet, making it easy to get lost in one's thoughts, which I was known to do on a semi-permanent basis. There was also the seclusion from the lack of employees, which made it an anti-social's dream job.

Though, sometimes being so alone could have consequences, such as not being good with people, or more specifically, guys. I usually became either a stuttering mess or a sarcastic asshole when faced with an attractive specimen. That's why I liked working with David so much. He was plain enough I could be myself.

Mrs. Jenkins knew how I felt about men and people in general. She could be as bad as my mother when it came to me dating. I could just imagine what she would have to say about my hesitancy to stick my arm in that hole. "Dear, everything worth having comes with a leap of faith. Just hold onto your panties and take the plunge."

I had only been working at the library for a day when she said that to me. I had been so shocked; I had fallen out of my seat from laughing so hard. Yes, she was a little eccentric. She takes the whole 'I'm old so I can say whatever I want' a little too far, but she had a lot of great advice, and I already loved her for it.

I took a deep breath and let it out. "What the hell."

I stepped back up to the hole and placed one hand on each side of it. I bent at the waist and squinted into the hole to see what waited.

Darkness.

While the cavern was lit up with the glowing symbols, the hole was nothing but complete blackness. I couldn't see a damn thing. I blew out a shaky breath between my teeth, all that lead up and nothing.

"Fuck it."

I threw up my hands and moved away from the hole. That rabbit was not worth becoming some creepy crawlies food. Studying the symbols as I walked away, I made a mental note to dig into the language section when I got back to work in the morning.

"Does Mop think Lady is gone, does Mop?"

I turned an ear back toward the hole at the squeaky voice's question. I took large strides, well as large as my short legs would let me back to the

hole.

Who was that?

"I don't know! Ye shouldn't have led her here in the first place!" A low rumbling voice growled in return.

I inched my face down to the hole and peered in again. Instead of darkness, there was a fading light coming from inside the hole. *Come home*, whispered against my face. I twisted around to look behind me. As usual, no one was there. Shoving down every part of me that screamed to just go back to the house and crawl into bed, I reached into the hole.

The warmth of the light engulfed my hand and tugged me toward it. I tried to retract my hand, but it was too late, it had its hooks in me. I remembered wondering if this is what it felt like to be sucked through a straw before everything went black.



Chapter 2

The Between

I LANDED WITH a hard smack. My head filled with miniature dancing cappuccinos. Coffee sounded good right now. I groaned at the damage my aching limbs had taken from the fall. Before I could assess my injuries, a door slammed shut behind me causing me to jerk up and open my eyes. I squeezed them shut again when piercing white light filled my vision.

My eyes! I was blind! I blinked a few times, waiting for my eyes to adjust. Okay, I guess I wasn't. I was okay.

It wasn't my eyesight that was the problem. It was the room, well not really. It wasn't a room but a big white space. Looking up, there was nothing but white. There was no way to tell how tall the room was, or from what I could see, how far it reached around me. There weren't any walls or windows. The only objects were four doors, one in each direction.

Someone seriously needed to rethink the décor.

The door closest to me wasn't anything extraordinary. It was made of plain old wood. I peeked around the edge of the door, and there was nothing. Besides the doorframe, there was nothing that would allow the door to stand on its own. There was no wall supporting it and nothing but more endless white space behind it.

I rattled the doorknob – locked.

Of course it was. Why wasn't I surprised? I beat on the door and shook the handle once more.

“Hello? Let me out!” I banged on the door harder and twisted the handle until my hand began to burn. My eyes darted around the room searching for another way out, but all I saw were doors and endless white.

I fought the urge to scream as I pulled my hair. What am I going to do? There was no one here and no way out. No one at home even knew where I was. They'd think I'd been kidnapped or was dead. I had to get out of here!

I considered the other doors and took off toward the one to my right. I jiggled the knob and banged on it but found it to be like the other one – locked.

Before I could think about it, I ran to the next and found it locked as well. I kicked the door and turned my gaze to the last remaining door.

It was more beat up than the other ones with scarring all along the surface. My hand moved to try the handle only to find it was missing.

Great. I wasn't going to get anywhere with this one.

I turned around in a circle and stared out into the white void. Good going. I was stuck in what was probably someone's bleached butt hole with nothing but doors to taunt me forever.

Just when my eyes were starting to strain from the blinding white light, something moved in the distance.

"Hello?" I stepped around the door, but before my feet could move in its direction a voice squawked at me from behind.

"I wouldn't go out there if I were you."

I whirled around. In the center of the room, where nothing had been before, was a circular reception desk. Behind the desk was some kind of bird. It wore a fuchsia-colored dress with a loud floral pattern. But unlike any bird I'd ever seen, it had not one, but two heads. One of the heads wore glasses on the brim of its beak, which it used it to tap away at the keys of a keyboard. The other one was watching me as if waiting for an answer.

"When did you get there?" I cocked my head to the side, looking back and forth where nothing had been before.

The head squawked and shook its head. "We've been here all along. You just haven't been looking hard enough."

"Oh." Well, that made no sense whatsoever. I looked from the two-headed bird and back out into the white void where the black spot had disappeared. "Why shouldn't I go out there?"

"You go out there you'll never get back out again, not without a guide at least. Now, if you'd just sign in here you can be on your way." The one not wearing the glasses pushed a clipboard toward me with her wing.

I ignored the clipboard and focused on the receptionists. "On my way where? I don't even know where I am."

"Type!" She waved her wing in the air. "This silly chit doesn't know where she is!"

The one called Type glanced up from her keyboard to give me a flat stare over the spectacles on her beak. Not finding me worth her effort, she turned back to the screen where it appeared she was watching an episode of Game of Thrones.

They had Internet? Go figure.

“As you can see...” The other head gestured toward the computer screen. “We don’t have time for you. So, if you would just sign in right here we can all get on with our lives.” She nudged the clipboard back toward me.

“But I don’t want to sign in! I want to go home.”

“Well, then, you shouldn’t have come here.” She flapped her wing back toward the door I came through. “Go back out the way you came.”

“It’s locked. I can’t get out,” I growled, digging my nails into the edge of the circular desk.

“Locked? Of course it’s locked!” Type glanced away from the screen for a moment before turning back. “Can’t be letting anybody come in and out as they please.”

“What she said.” The other head nodded in agreement. “If you want out, use your key.”

“Key?” I patted myself even though I knew I didn’t have a key or pockets for that matter. “I don’t have a key.”

“Well, then, you will just have to sign in, and we can issue you a temporary key.” She pushed the clipboard toward me once again.

I growled and yanked the clipboard from her grasp. Looking down at the clipboard, I poised the pen in my hand as I read the sheet. It was your basic sign-in form – asking for name, date, and place. There was only one entry on the sheet of paper, written in sloppy cursive. It read: Mop and Trip with today’s date and the human realm listed under place.

I almost wrote down my information and the human realm like the previous signers, but stopped. I wanted to go home, but the other doors bugged me. Where did they go?

“How am I supposed to fill this out if I don’t know where I am?”

“Gripe, just tell the girl where she is already. I want to finish this season before lunch,” Type piped in without tearing her eyes away from the screen.

The head named Gripe huffed. “This.” She gestured around the room. “Is the Between.”

My eyes followed her wing as it circled the air. “Between? Between what?”

“Everything of course.” Gripe rolled her eyes. “So, where will it be?” She held up the pen and clipboard once more, an impatient look in her eyes.

I sighed and reached out for the pen, but then I heard whispers coming from the other side of the desk. Those were the ones I had heard from inside the hole! I craned my neck around the large bird and saw the curve of the rabbit's long white ears.

I stepped away from the desk and pointed toward the rabbit. "Um, I'm with him."

Gripe sniffed, putting her nose in the air and turned back to watch the screen with her other head.

I made my way over to the door on the other side of the desk. In front of the second door I had tried, stood the white-eared rabbit and a brown little man. They were arguing. As I came into view, their voices became more urgent.

"Ye idiot! She followed ye here!"

"Trip is sorry! Trip was just ever so hungry and Lady's carrots are ever so good."

No higher than my waist, the white rabbit wasn't really a rabbit at all. It had the face of a rabbit, but its white ears hung all the way to the ground. Instead of a little cottontail, it had a long, shorthaired tail with a tuft of hair at the end.

The other one was a little brown man with a pointed red hat and matching overalls. His large nose and ears seemed out of place on his small face. The beard along his chin was short and as dark as his onyx-colored eyes, which glared up at me as I appraised him.

"Please don't eat Trip!" I jumped in place as the rabbit-like creature latched onto my knees. "Trip didn't mean any harm! Trip just loves Lady's carrots so much! Way better than other humans! Blech!" He spat on the ground. "They feel like worms and death in Trip's mouth."

I tilted my head to the side at the rabbit's pleas. This was the rabbit I was chasing? No wonder he could get through all my traps. Any normal rabbit wouldn't have sharp fangs and opposable thumbs. Then again, wherever I was, wasn't on the spectrum of normal.

"What's it gonna be, Lady?" The brown little man grunted, crossing his arms over his chest. "Are ye gonna eat him or not?"

I wrinkled my nose at the thought of eating something that could talk. I had nothing against eating meat, I loved meat, but I never wanted to meet my food before I ate it. At least not any that could beg for their lives.

"Uh, I guess I'm not." The words came out slow and unsure.

“Oh, thank you, beautiful Lady, merciful Lady!” Trip, as he called himself, hugged my legs tight. “Lady won’t regret it, Lady won’t. Trip swears!”

“Calm down. That’s great and everything, but what about my garden? And stop calling me Lady, my name is Kat.” I pried him off of my leg, holding him up by his ears. Shit he’s heavy. “How are you going to pay me back for all those carrots you stole?”

Trip lifted up his hands to show his empty palms. “Trip does not have anything to pay Lady with, Trip doesn’t.”

I shook my head at him. “I don’t want your money.”

I was about to say I just wanted to go home but stopped. Come home. The voices had stopped the moment I had gone into the rabbit hole. Could this be what it wanted?

I mustered the little bit of courage I had and pointed a finger at the door next to us. “Tell me about the doors and why is there a hole in the woods?”

Trip’s eyes became wide, and he struggled to get out of my grasp. “Trip can’t tell Lady that! No, Trip can’t!”

I fought to keep a hold of the little white devil, but he slipped from my hands and scurried over to the brown pint-sized man.

“Mop tell, Lady! Mop tell!”

The brown man, known as Mop, stood in front of Trip blocking my path and glared once more. “Ye can’t be askin’ him that. We ain’t even supposed to be talkin’ to the likes of ye.”

I matched his glare with one of my own and headed for the door. If they weren’t going to tell me, I would just have to figure it out myself. Besides, I was a smart girl, and there was nothing I hadn’t read – or Hollywood hadn’t already desensitized me to – that I couldn’t handle.

“No, Lady!” Trip chased after me, pressing his back to the wood of the door to block my path. “Lady mustn’t go in!”

“And why not?” I threw my hands up in the air with a growl. “You took my carrots, you led me here, and now I want to know what is in there.” I turned the door handle, finding it already unlocked when it wasn’t before. I tried to pull it open, but Trip’s weight against the door had been added to by Mop.

“Ye will get ye payment, but ye can’t go in. Can’t ye read the sign?” He pointed a chubby brown finger at a sign I swore hadn’t been there

before.

Crap kept popping up out of nowhere. I glared up at the sign. The sign read, 'No Humans Allowed' in big, black, curly letters. Well, weren't they racist, or was it humanist?

"Well then," I huffed, tapping my foot. "How do you expect to pay me back?"

"Trip here be a great guard, aren't ye, Trip?" Trip nodded his head in vigor, his tail wagging in the air. "He'll protect ye garden from other rodents and the like in return for the occasional..." The little man eyed Trip in warning. "...carrot."

I stared up at the floating sign, thinking about his proposal. I guess it sounded all right, but it didn't satisfy my curiosity to know more about the doors. I hadn't risked my hand and sanity to come all this way to leave with nothing.

"All right, you win." Trip and Mop relaxed against the door. "So, how do I get back to my world?"

Trip moved away from the door and hopped toward the other side of the Between. I moved to follow Trip across the room but stopped when Mop didn't move from his spot against the door. His eyes narrowed at me, suspicion on his face.

"Are you coming?"

He stood there debating if he could trust me, his brow furrowing further. After a moment or two, he must have come to a decision, because he moved away from the door and toward where Trip waited.

"Ya, I'm comin'."

I let Mop move ahead of me as we made our way past the reception desk. Both bird heads moved away from the computer monitor to watch me with a knowing leer. I tried not to flinch at their gaze and focus on my plan. When Mop was far enough away, I spun around and darted back to the door.

"What are ye doing?" Mop yelled out. "Stop!"

"No, Lady, no!"

My hand grasped the knob, but I hesitated at the birds' dark laughter coming from behind me. Whatever their deal was I needed to know what was in here, and I wasn't going to let fear stop me. I yanked the door open and braced myself for whatever was to come next.



Chapter 3

In & Out Again

THE GROUND SMELLED of lavender. It was calm and peaceful. It made a girl want to lie there forever, and I would have had it not been for the biting cold of the ground pressed against my face. It felt like stone, but stones don't usually have such a pleasant scent to them. Or did they? I normally didn't make a habit of smelling the ground. After all, people might have thought I was crazy.

I shoved my hair out of my face as my eyes fluttered open. Great, I'd lost my hair tie. My hair was going to be all over the place. I should just cut it and get it over with.

I moved into a kneeling position, searching the ground for my missing hair tie. While the stone may have smelled nice, the ugly grayish brown color wasn't doing it any favors. I winced where the edges of the stones bit into my hands as I moved to sit up.

I rubbed my eyes and stretched my back to get the dull ache from my bumpy landing out. Traveling by rabbit hole was not recommended, nor a particularly sane choice of travel. Not that going through a door without looking to see what was on the other side first was advisable.

My eyes stung as they adjusted from the blinding white of the Between to the gray of the surrounding stone walls. Above me was a blue sky with birds chirping as they flew by; it was slightly more cheery than I expected. I glanced back to where I had come from. A leafless oak tree stood in the middle of the little area and smack dab in the middle of the trunk was a hole.

I pushed aside the chance of me getting a rational explanation as to how I had come through a door and ended up outside a hole. Besides, I cared more about how my big butt had fit through it in the first place. Not that it should have surprised me since I had already been sucked through a hole and out a door once before, but the academic in me fought to find some kind of non-magical solution.

Flapping wings drew my eyes to an upper branch of the small tree as a spotted barn owl landed on its surface. It hooted a curious call. Its unusual

ice blue eyes followed my every move. Ignoring the owl, my eyes locked onto my hair tie floating in a small pond below the tree. I crawled across the stone to kneel before the pond.

The water was clear enough for me to see small fish swimming around but deep enough that I was wary of what lurked beneath. How deep did the pond go? It wasn't very big, more of a decorative pond in someone's backyard than an actual pond. It was probably no longer than I was.

As I reached toward the surface of the water to nab my hair tie, a murky white figure began to move toward me. When it got close enough to the surface to see, I tried to move back. Deathly pale skin was stretched across the bones of a bodiless face. The sockets where its eyes should have been were empty and appeared as if someone had painted over them with black paint. Its mouth opened wide to reveal razor-sharp teeth. I struggled to tear my hand back to my side, but I was locked in place by the eyeless gaze of the creature coming at me.

My heart raced as it bobbed closer and closer to the surface, my hand just barely touched the water's edge. I turned my eyes away from the water to the owl perched on the tree that was watching with mild fascination.

"Help me!" I pleaded. I turned back to the pond when he did nothing but cock his head to the side.

I grabbed my wrist with my other hand and tugged as hard as I could, the skin on my wrist pinched beneath my other hand. A scream built up in me as the sharp teeth came closer and closer to the surface. I closed my eyes and turned my head just as it was about to chomp down. I was yanked away from the pool, my hand free of its grasp.

"What the hell are ye doin'?"

I rubbed my wrist as Mop yelled at me; my eyes darted back to the pond where the white head had disappeared back to the bottom. I cringed to think what could have happened if Mop hadn't gotten there in time. I'd have one less hand and probably a less-than-flattering nickname – One-handed Kat or Katherine the Nub. I definitely would have looked into getting a hook of some kind, maybe something in platinum.

"Lady! Are ye listenin' to me?"

"Huh? Sorry." I gave a sheepish grin. "What did you say?"

Mop placed his hands on his hips and glared. "I said are all ye kind as dumb as ye, or are ye just the exception?"

"Hey!"

I was offended he would even lop me in with the other humans. I may not be the smartest of the bunch, but I was better off than some. I wouldn't have been able to trick the little brown man into letting me in otherwise.

"I was smart enough to get in here."

Mop snorted. "Only to have ye hand bit off in the first five minutes. Didn't ye mother ever teach ye not to be lookin' for trouble?"

The thought of my mother teaching me anything was laughable. When I was seven I wanted to learn how to ride a bike. She had flat out refused and had given me an hour-long lecture on how bicycles were not for ladies of our stature and asked why I couldn't take up something more suitable, like knitting. In the end, I had to beg a neighbor's dad to teach me on a secondhand bike I had gotten from a pawnshop with my own allowance.

I opened my mouth to answer when the unhelpful owl decided to make his presence known. Mop's eyes snapped to the feathered creature and he frowned harder. Glad to know I'm not the only one who didn't like the owl.

Turning back to me, Mop wagged a finger in my face. "Why couldn't ye just go home? Now, ye are gonna get us all in trouble."

"Mop doesn't think he knows, does Mop?" Trip's face appeared inside the hole in the tree, his brow etched with worry. Had he been in there all this time?

"Of course, he does! It be his kingdom." He marched up to me, one of his stubby fingers pointing at me. "We're all doomed if we donna get ye back to yer world before he comes."

Trip hopped out of the tree and landed next to us. His furry body followed suit and, in a spout of irony, tripped on his own long floppy ears. His windy tail hung in the air, limp and dejected.

I felt bad for him, I really did. After all, it was my fault we were here to begin with. But if he could have just restrained himself from getting into my garden, I would never have followed him to the cave and ended up in the damn hole.

"Why can't I just go back out the way I came?" I pointed to the hole in the tree. Mop and Trip looked at me as if I had grown a second head.

"Ye can't go back that way. It only goes one way." Mop's stubby legs teetered across the cobblestone. "The only way ye gettin' out be through the orchard." My eyes followed his pudgy finger, which was pointing to an opening in the wall that surrounded us.

“Well, then, let’s go.” My foot moved in the direction Mop pointed, but Trip was once again blocking my path.

“No! No, Lady!” Trip shook his head and held up his hands. “Lady doesn’t want to go in there! Lady would get eaten for sure, Lady would!”

I put my hands on my hips and made an unladylike growl. I was getting tired of being told what I should and shouldn’t do. “If I can’t go back, then the only way to go is forward, unless you want me to stay in this spot forever?”

Mr. Blue Eyes, who had been watching our exchange, hooted as if to agree with me. The sound startled Trip, his frightened eyes darted between the owl and me. Why was he scared of a little owl?

“You’re not very brave, are you?” I shook my head in disbelief. “It’s a wonder you were able to steal any of my carrots at all.”

Trip tugged his ears over his face and hunched down into himself. “Trip is sorry, Lady. Trip doesn’t want to see Lady hurt, Trip doesn’t.”

His long tail seemed to be the most expressive part of his body, because it drooped down in his despair. His childlike persona had me almost regretting putting him in this situation.

Almost.

Mop shoved Trip aside and grabbed my hand, pulling me toward the entrance. “I know how ye feel, Trip. But we gotta get her outta here. Humans be forbidden, lest ye forgot. Ye don’t want him to be findin’ her, do ye?”

Trip stopped tugging on his ears, his eyes wide. “No! Trip no want that!” He hopped across the cobblestone and grabbed my other hand, helping Mop to lead me into the stone corridor.

I let myself be dragged along the path, and my eyes drank in the surroundings. There weren’t any turns in front of us, only a long walkway surrounded by stone walls on both sides. I couldn’t tell how far it went, though it seemed endless, and the foliage covering the walls only added to the effect. All along the walls were long, windy vines tipped with pretty little multicolored flowers.

“Where exactly are we?”

“Now ye want to know?” Mop grunted like it should have been my first question. I was a little busy finding my hair tie, which of course was still in the pond.

And what was up this little goblin's butt? Had I killed his grandma or something? Insulted his heritage? I couldn't do a single thing right in his beady little eyes.

"Ye have the gracious honor of being in the UnSeelie Court. Not that it means much to ye." He snorted at me over his shoulder. I was getting the distinct impression he didn't like me much.

Still holding Trip's hand, I stopped beside a small bundle of flowers, its hue a mixture of purples and reds I'd never seen before. I leaned into smell them when the flowers parted to reveal a bulging yellow eyeball.

"What the hell?" I jumped back with a screech. Mop and Trip were at my side in an instant.

"What ye yellin' for? It's just a beetle." The grumpy troll chuckled at me before turning away.

I glared at him before looking back at the so-called beetle. For a moment, I thought the eye was an illusion, like those butterflies that use their wing design to ward off predators, and then the eye began to follow me as I moved side to side. I reached out to touch it, but its wings fluttered over the eye like an eyelid and took off over the wall's edge.

"Well, that's a relief." I sniffed the flowers the beetle had been resting on. "For a moment, I thought I might be in some kind of Alice in Wonderland scenario."

Mop jerked me away from the flowers and clamped his hands over my mouth. "Are ye stupid? Don't be sayin' that name!"

My eyes narrowed at the hand over my mouth, and for a moment, I was half tempted to lick him, but then the flowers started to whisper. Mop and Trip's eyes filled with alarm as the flowers twittered to each other down each side of the walls. Each of them whispered Alice's name like it was a forbidden secret.

"Trip is scared, Trip is." Trip tugged on my hand, hiding his face behind his ears.

Mop growled next to me, "Now ye done it! It couldn't get any worse I thought, but no! Ye just had and go say that blasted woman's name! Goin' to be bringin' the whole Underground down on us now. No good, nosy child saying forbidden words—"

"What'd I say? Alice?" I cut in.

"Would ye stop sayin' it! Do ye want to be losin' ye head?" He threw his hands up in the air and shook his head as if he couldn't believe I was

stupid enough to say it again.

My right eyebrow twitched. This place was giving me a headache. How was I supposed to know what to do and what not to do?

“Make up your mind. Are we in Wonderland, the Underground, or the UnSeelie Court?” Pulling my hand from Trip, I crossed my arms over my chest.

“Ye humans and ye need to define everything.” Mop scoffed and stepped up to a red mossy spot on the opposite side of the wall. It was the only spot void of the chattering flowers. He tickled the fuzz of the moss, causing it to spread out along the wall and form a rectangular door shape.

“We be where I say we be. I don’t know nothing bout no Wonderland though, that be what the other one called it.”

“Mop can’t take Lady in there!” Trip’s words were filled with panic.

Mop clucked his tongue. “We have no choice. We had sometime before ye started blabbin’ bout forbidden nonsense and now thems flowers be talkin’. They be notifyin’ him for sure.”

Mop fiddled with a bag at his side for a moment, before pulling out a ring of keys. Flipping through them, he held up a dark, fuzzy, red key with sharp teeth like prongs. He stuck the key in the hole and twisted. When the lock popped, he placed his hand on the moss once more, turning what seemed to be a doorknob.

He pushed the door open for me and gestured for me to enter. “Reaper knows who else be listenin’ in when he finds out. And this way be faster.”

“But here is dangerous, here is,” Trip’s voice shook as he followed close to me. I wasn’t sure if I should be afraid or not. Trip seemed like the type to be afraid of his own shadow.

My eyes focused on the dark red within the wall. After everything I’d seen so far, this was by far the weirdest place I had ever been to. It even trumped that one time I was talked into going to a heavy metal concert with my ex-boyfriend, Todd, and ended up in a mosh pit. I was black and blue for a week.

I took a step into the door. My foot squished down into the red mossy floor. I made a small disgusted noise in my throat as I focused on the hope that the fluid coming to the top wouldn’t stain my white tennis shoes. Wings flapped in the distance, and the red door shut behind me. What was in front of me made me think I’d rather be back in the mosh pit.



Chapter 4

Teeth

WHEN MY EYES adjusted to the dark contrast of the new area, I instantly wished I had kept my diarrhea-of-a-mouth shut. The moss that made up the door spread across a room that spanned half a football field. My feet made a squishing noise as I kept close to Mop, who marched across the mossy floor without a wary glance to the shadows whispering at the edges.

I kept my eyes on the shadows and lowered my voice, “Who’s this *he* you guys keep talking about? And call me Kat, would you?”

“Ye shouldn’t give ye name out so freely here.” Mop’s eyes swept the room as if to look for something unseen. “Ye never know who be listenin’. And *he* is the glorious Dark Prince of the UnSeelie Court. Ye be lucky to never meet him.”

“Prince, huh? So he’s in charge of everything, then?” I eyed the shadows that seemed to be moving with the corner of my eye. We were barely halfway across the room. I expected them to show themselves by now. But the creatures, whatever they were, seemed content to watch us from afar.

Trip gripped my hand tighter and kept his voice hushed, “Only of the outer realm. It’s how he keeps humans out, it is. Keep humans away from us Fae.”

“Fae?” I paused to question Trip. “You mean like faeries?”

“Ba!” I jumped back as Mop spit on the ground. “Faeries! Those little pests ain’t got nothin’ on we Fae.”

“Oh? What’s the difference?” I cocked my head to the side, my interest piqued.

As far as I was concerned, Mop was as much a pest as any Tinkerbelle. Though, the idea of flying made my stomach curl. It was a good thing I was short. Heights and I had a disagreement once at a theme park. At which time, we had decided it was in both of our best interests that we go our separate ways.

“What? There be a huge difference!” Mop glared at me and put his hands on his hips. “What do ye think we Fae do?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Grant wishes and stuff?” I shrugged my shoulders, and then tensed as the shadows giggled. “What’s so funny?”

“Lady funny, Lady is.” Trip laughed along with our creepy audience, and his tail wagged behind him.

I found it curious that Mop and Trip weren’t at all concerned with the slithering forms that I could barely make out on the sides. Maybe they only crept me out?

Mop shook his head, his eyes on the ground. “Silly girl. Many of ye kind be dyin’ here ‘cause they be lookin’ for wishes.” Mop spun around and waved a finger in my face. “Ye be gettin’ the same fate if ye be tryin’ to get things for free.”

I gulped and eyed the slithering forms once more as they snickered. They sure knew how to prey on one’s fears. I was never sleeping with the lights off again.

“Ain’t nothin’ free here,” Mop warned as we began the trek across the squishy moss again.

I tried to suppress my disgust, as each step caused a sort of flatulent sound. I was glad I had had the foresight to wear my tennis shoes and not my flip-flops. That split-second decision when I rushed out the door had saved the pedicure my mother had insisted I get for the upcoming wedding.

As we got closer to the end of the room the moss dissipated, revealing more cobblestones underneath. The edges filled with shadows also began to disperse, though no extra light was present. Finally, the adventure in weird squishy land had come to an end.

“What is this place?” I ignored Mop’s huff in response to my question. “If this way is faster, why didn’t we go this way to begin with?”

“Cause.” Mop dug into the pocket of his trousers and pulled out what looked like a biscuit and another key. How many of those things did he have? “The other way may be slower, but it be a straight shot to the orchard and ye way outta here. But who knows whom those weeds be talkin’ to. It be safer for us all if we go this way.”

Before I could ask any more questions, Mop stepped up to another part of the wall that was part moss and part cobblestone. He lifted a hand and tickled a patch above his head. This time instead of a door appearing, a

large mouth with sharp, moss-covered teeth and beady eyes popped out, glowering at us.

It made me think of my Aunt Lydia: fur covered and in need of a dentist in a bad way. I covered my mouth to suppress a giggle, but when it opened its mouth to snarl at us, my laughter died in my throat.

“What do you want? Can’t a wall get some sleep around here?” The voice that came out of the mouth was a surprisingly smooth tone, even with its sharp teeth gleaming through its menacing growl.

“Oh, quit ye gripin’. I brought ye a biscuit, so let us in.” Mop waved the biscuit in front of the mossy wall’s face.

“A biscuit! I haven’t had one of those in ages!”

The smile that formed on the cranky wall’s face was even more terrifying than its gnashing teeth. The fact of how crazy it seemed that I was even contemplating how scary a talking wall was, was not lost on me. It wasn’t the first time I wondered if I was really here or had got knocked out chasing that damn rabbit back in the cavern.

Its eager smile turned into a wary grimace as he eyed me. “But what do you want in return?”

Curiosity caused me to lean down to Trip, who was still clutching my hand in his merciless grip. “Why does he need a biscuit to let us pass?”

Trip’s eyes never left the teeth in the wall. “Lady, must remember what Mop say, Lady must. Nothing is ever free. Lady must give to get.” Trip’s scared eyes turned serious when they locked with mine. “Be careful what Lady trades. Fae are tricky, they are.”

“Tricky? You mean like Puck?” I thought back to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Puck thought it would be great fun to have everyone fall in love with the wrong person. There was something telling me the kind of tricks these Fae pulled would not end with someone screwing their best friend’s boyfriend.

“What is *that* doing down here?” The wall said it like it left a bad taste in his mouth.

I wasn’t a *that*, I wanted to say, but a sharp look from Mop made me keep my remarks to myself.

“Don’t be worryin’ about her. Let us through and say nothin’ bout her, and ye will get the tasty biscuit.” Mop waved the biscuit in a tempting motion under what could have been the wall’s nose.

The wall looked skeptical at the deal. “Only one biscuit for all that, seems like a mighty high price to keep my head.”

“But you don’t have a head!” I blurted without thinking.

“No head!” I covered my ears at the piercing howl that shook the ground. “You are in my head!”

Taking my hands off my ears, I glanced around, muttering to myself, “Pretty empty for a head.”

“What did you say?”

I put my hands out, bracing for the ground to shake once more. I don’t know how it heard me. I hadn’t been talking very loud, and as far as I could tell, it didn’t have any ears. Not wanting to anger it further, I changed my words.

“I said, if we’re in your head, then where is your body?” I waved my arms around, trying to put on my best ‘I-give-a-fuck’ face. Which was only half as good as my ‘please-tell-me-more’ face.

The menacing fangs in its mouth gleamed as it smiled at us, and then the ground started to shake. “Why it’s right here!”

“Oh no!” Trip yelped as if anticipating what the wall would do next.

The red fur covering the ground began to roll around us like waves in the sea. We cried out as a wave knocked us off our feet. I put my arms up to protect my head as we were thrown about. Then, when I was beginning to feel like a rag doll, it dumped us back on to the ground at the entrance.

“Yer just lookin’ for trouble, ain’t ye?” Mop stood as he dusted himself off. “Why’d ye have to go insultin’ him like that?”

“Him?” I groaned, easing up off the ground. This place was not kind to the body. “It has a gender?”

“I heard that!” A roar came from the other side of the room.

“Would ye stop!” Mop glared at me. “Of course he has a gender. All beings in the UnSeelie Court be alive.” He gestured to the shadowy figures slithering along the edges. “Though, not all of them be conscious of it.”

He picked up the biscuit he’d dropped and thrust it toward me. “Here. Ye made the mess, ye can fix it.”

I took the biscuit and turned it over in my hand, frowning when nothing unusual stood out. It was an ordinary biscuit, hard as a rock, but ordinary.

“How am I supposed to get across that?” I pointed to the roaring crimson waves, still tearing across the floor.

“That’s yer problem. I’m stayin’ outta it.” He crossed his arms and plopped down on the ground, dismissing me with a turn of his back.

I glanced down at the white ball of fur huddled at my feet. “I don’t suppose you have any advice for me?”

Trip uncurled himself from the cocoon of his ears and gazed up at me with apologetic eyes. His ears and tail hung heavy at his feet. I supposed it was too much to hope that he’d be able to help me out of this mess.

My mother always said I had diarrhea of the mouth. I always ended up saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. It usually ended with embarrassment for me, or more often than not, my mother.

“Katherine, some opinions are better left unsaid.” She’d lecture me whenever I made a comment about how someone’s dress made them look fat, or their engagement ring was a lot smaller than I would have expected. I was usually more mindful with my thoughts, but this place was making them bounce around like a beach bunny’s breasts, only a small snap away from bursting forth into the world.

“Trip is sorry, Lady, Trip is. Maybe if Lady gives the biscuit to Teeth, Teeth will be happy again.” Trip shrugged his small shoulders with an encouraging smile.

“Mop. Trip. Teeth. What kind of names are those?” I snorted. No points for creativity apparently. Next thing I know I’ll be running into Doc and Dopey.

“Thems not be our real names.” Mop growled from over his shoulder. “Thems be what we are known for. Only a fool would give someone else their true name.”

“So, you’re telling me your name is Mop because you, what, mop?”

“It sounds silly when ye be puttin’ it that way.” Mop frowned at the ground before his eyes snapped up to me. “There ain’t no shame in keepin’ a clean home.”

Ignoring Mop’s venomous gaze, I turned to Trip. “So, what do you do then, Trip?” The white fur ball cracked the first smile I had seen since the Between. “Let me guess. You trip people?”

“Yes, yes!” Trip nodded, his tail whipping back and forth. “Trip is the best tripper in all UnSeelie Court, Trip is.” He opened his arms wide. “In all Underground.”

“Underground? That’s the second time you’ve called this place that.” I peeked back at Mop, hoping he would fill in the blanks.

An exasperated sigh was all I got, but after a moment, he finally turned to me holding up a finger. "The UnSeelie Court only be one of three realms in the Underground. There also be the Seelie Court and the Shadow Realm."

"What's the difference?"

"The UnSeelie, that be us." He pointed at Trip and himself. "We are more flexible about the rules. We go for what we want and will do just 'bout anything to get it."

"And the Seelie?"

"The Seelie. Bah!" I jumped back as he spat on the ground. "They only be carin' about appearances and doin' the honorable thing. Or what they think be honorable. Rules are rules," he mimicked. "Don't be lettin' them make ye think they won't bend the rules when it suits them."

"So, they're the good Fae? Does that mean the UnSeelie Court are the bad Fae?" I surveyed my two companions. "But you don't seem bad to me?"

"There ain't no good or bad, only the intent behind it." I tensed at the molten glare Mop sent my way. "A Seelie would kill ye just as easily as an UnSeelie would if ye be gettin' in their way. They'd just try to find a reason to back up the killin' is all." His nose quirked up as he snorted. "Don't want to be sullyin' their delicate hands."

I nodded. It kind of made sense. My mother would have fit right in with the Seelie crowd. No problem. The other doors in the Between must have led to the other realms. I was glad I ended up in the UnSeelie Court. I didn't see myself lasting more than five minutes in the Seelie Court. Though, Mop and Trip seemed fine enough, it appeared like the majority of the Underground hated humans. I couldn't imagine the shadow realm would welcome me either.

"What about the Shadow Realm?"

Mop gave an impatient tap of his foot. "How 'bout this? I'll tell ye what ye want to know when ye get us out of here. I'll even give ye a hint." He pointed to the biscuit still clenched in my hand. "It's gonna take a lot more biscuits than the one I pulled out of ye garbage to calm him down."

"Garbage? But I haven't had biscuits in over a week." My brow crinkled as I examined the biscuit in my hand again and began to notice the green tinge on the edges. My lip twisted as I dropped the biscuit to the

ground with a thud. I forced back the urge to vomit when little white maggots poked their heads out of the sides.

“That’s disgusting, Mop! You’ve had that thing in your pocket this whole time?” The fact that I had even touched it for a brief moment made my skin crawl.

“Ye didn’t have to go and do that!” Mop scooped up the biscuit and shoved it back into the depths of his overalls. “Ye humans be too wasteful.” He gestured toward where Teeth resided on the other side of the roaring waves. “So what if it be old? It’ll be another decade before he be seein’ another biscuit.”

The new information spun an idea in my head. I turned back to the waves of red and strained my neck to see Teeth over them. I couldn’t see him, the waves didn’t make as much noise as real waves, so he could probably still hear me. Probably.

“Teeth!” Silence followed for a moment before a reluctant growl replied.

“What do you want now? To insult me further? Maybe you’d like to comment on my mother next? Or is my physical appearance all that matters to you?”

I winced at his accusations. I really did know how to stick my foot in my mouth. I may not be a big people person but I was certainly fluent in bullshit.

“I apologize for my words earlier. They were ignorant and judgmental.” I glared down at Mop when he snorted. “I am new to your world, and as you’d expect, not used to seeing so much...” I paused to think of an inoffensive word. “...life around me.”

The red waves died down into a low roll as my words penetrated the silence in the air. Teeth didn’t say anything for a few moments, and I wondered if he had once again hidden away back into the wall. A deep bellowing laugh shook the ground beneath our feet, revealing he was still there.

“I pity you, so limited by your imagination. There are so many more wondrous and terrifying things you can find out your back door.”

My companions and I peeked between each other before we inched across the calm floor. When it seemed like Teeth wasn’t going to throw us back again, we hastened our stride. We didn’t stop moving until we were standing in front of Teeth’s menacing face once again.

Teeth looked us over for a moment with a grin still on his mouth. “Oh, all right. All is forgiven!”

Mop stepped forward. “So, ye will let us pass?”

“Ha!” Teeth barked. “Not for a measly molded biscuit I won’t!” His eyes rolled so they were focused on me. “What can you offer in return?”

“Um.” I thought for a second and opened my mouth to reply, but Trip tugged on my hand. Leaning down to his level, my ears peeled to hear his hushed words.

“Lady should be careful, Lady should.” Trip eyed the wall beside us. “Lady shouldn’t offer something Lady isn’t willing to give.”

Contemplating his caution, I thought about what I could offer to the talking wall. What did Teeth want that I could give him? I didn’t have any money. I doubted he could use it in the Underground anyway. All I had were the clothes on my back, and they weren’t even my best ones. I rubbed my hands together and grimaced at the remaining residue from the old biscuit.

Of course! Biscuits. That’s what Teeth wanted.

“Well? I’m waiting.”

I tapped my chin, pretending to be deep in thought. “How about in exchange for our passage I will give you a hundred biscuits?”

Hopefully, he wouldn’t eat them all at once. I knew if I ate that many carbs I’d be bloated for days. Not to mention the calories!

Teeth studied me as he mused over my offer. “How do I know you will bring them? It is hard enough to get into our world; how you did it this time will be up for a long debate, no doubt” He glared at Mop and Trip, who stared down at the ground. “I can’t imagine you could make it in a second time.”

“Trip will be guarding my gardens in exchange for carrots. He can bring them to you.”

Trip squeaked next to me. I felt bad for putting Trip in the middle of it, but Mop sure as hell wasn’t going to do it. So the little rabbit-like creature was going to have to be my scapegoat.

“Very well.” Teeth watched Trip who was trembling at my side. Amusement glinted in his eyes at the terror he was inflicting. Then his eyes focused back on me with a malevolent glint. “But I want a blood oath on it.”

“Al—”, I was about to agree, when Mop burst out next to me.

“Ye maggot-eatin’, mud-chompin’ eggymelt!” Mop spat out an array of other insults, half of which I had never even heard of. “Ye know damn well a blood oath ain’t be worth no bander suckin’ biscuits.”

“What’s the big deal?” I frowned down at the outraged brownie. “It’s just a little blood, right? Like spitting on your hand before you shake on it.”

Mop’s hands curled into fists as he glared daggers at Teeth. “It ain’t be just a little blood. It be an oath that binds ye life force to it. If ye break it, ye forfeit ye life.”

“What the fuck!” I sputtered. “That’s ridiculous!”

“Now ye see why we don’t be takin’ them lightly.” He turned his head away and waved an arm at me. “But it be up to ye. It be ye life on the line, and we can’t stay in here forever.”

“Can’t we just go back the other way?” I gave a longing look back toward the other door. The guards had to be a better option than this. Right?

“Not if ye value ye head.”

Inside I screamed. I was backed into a corner with no way out but to do what Teeth asked. I didn’t want to risk my life for a bunch of biscuits, but I also didn’t want to be stuck in Teeth’s head for the rest of my life. With Teeth’s short temper, it probably wouldn’t be long at all.

I gripped my hair in my hands, the thickness of it tangling in my fingers as I growled. “Fine. What do I have to do?”

“Lady must state the terms of the oath and Lady must swear it on Lady’s blood, Lady must. Then Teeth must do the same.” Trip gestured for me to come in close and put a hand up to his mouth. “Lady must get words right, Lady must. Fae will try to—”

“Trick me. Yes, I know. Thanks.” I tugged the bottom of my grey sweater.

Where to start? It wasn’t everyday I did a blood oath. I hadn’t done a pinkie swear since I was twelve, and that was when I promised Ryan Moody I wouldn’t tell anyone he tried to steal my mom’s clothes at my birthday party. He said he only wanted to look at them, but the fact that he recently had a sex change had me thinking otherwise.

“I’ll go first then.” Teeth cleared his throat. “I, Teeth of the UnSeelie Court, swear a blood oath to let the human pass—”

“And Mop and Trip.” Mop interrupted.

Teeth gave an unpleasant frown. “And Mop and Trip. To pass through into the deeper parts of the UnSeelie Court in exchange for a hundred

biscuits from the human realm. Now you, human.” His teeth gnashed together as he waited for me to start.

“All right. I—”

“Wait a second, wait a second,” I growled as Mop interrupted again. He pointed a finger at Teeth. “Ye forgot to put ye won’t be tellin’ anyone bout Lady being here.”

“Oh?” A not so innocent grin spread across Teeth’s face. “Did I? My apologies. I, Teeth also swear to not tell anyone that the human was or has ever been here. Happy?”

“Hardly.” Mop huffed but gestured to me to continue.

I turned back to the intimidating wall before us and opened my mouth to say – nothing. I didn’t know how to refer to myself. Usually, I would have stated my name, Katherine Marie Nottingham, but as my stick-up-his-ass guide loved to remind me, I shouldn’t give out my name to just anyone.

Trip and Mop called me Lady, so I supposed I could use that, but it seemed too much like a name as well. Although, Teeth referred to me as the human in his speech, would it be vague enough to wiggle my way out of the deal if the need arose?

“The human swears a blood oath to Teeth, to bring him a hundred biscuits from the human world via Trip in exchange for the human and her companions, Trip and Mop’s, passage into the UnSeelie Court and for his silence in regard to the human ever being here.” I held my breath as I finished my oath, hoping the wall hadn’t noticed my scheme.

There was silence for a heartbeat before Mop broke it with a chuckle. “All right ye toothy bastard, open up so we can be on our way.”

“Wait. That’s it? Don’t you need blood?” I didn’t really want to open a vein but it seemed too simple for a blood oath.

Mop snorted. “Ye don’t be needin’ to spill blood to make a blood oath. Ye words be the magic that binds ye. Now they be marked in ye blood. Can’t ye feel it?”

No. I didn’t feel anything. No tingles, nothing. Not that I was going to tell them that. “Uh, sure.”

“So let us out, we got places to be.” Mop turned back to Teeth with an impatient scowl.

“Keep your trousers on, you filthy brownie.” His beady eyes focused on me. “I’ll be expecting my biscuits within a week’s time after you return to the human world.”

“Of course.” I forced a smile on my face as I hid my shaky hands inside my sleeves. I was almost out of here. I just had to hold on for a few more minutes.

Teeth’s face melded back into the wall, and in its place was a door where the key hole Mop had turned earlier had been. The moment he was gone, I could feel the tension draining out of not just me but Mop and Trip as well. I had gotten away with it. We were going to get out of the stupid wall’s head and without a single payment!

“Well, don’t just be standin’ there. The longer we dawdle the more Fae hear of ye presence.” Mop shoved past me to the door, throwing it open without caution to what lay on the other side.

I placed a cautious hand on the side of the doorframe following behind Trip, who seemed more than eager to be out of here. Who could blame him? What lay on the other side was far more colorful than the blood red of Teeth’s inner workings.

Instead of the stone walls that surrounded the walkways at the beginning, large, emerald-green hedges surrounded us. The melodious sound of a flute playing could be heard somewhere off in the distance. Enraptured by the change of scenery, I didn’t notice my companions still figures until a deep silky voice met my ears.

“Well, look what we have here.”



Chapter 5

The Prince

TRIP SQUEAKED AT the new voice and launched himself onto my body. I stumbled to keep my balance as his arms trapped mine. The fearless Mop turned into a frightened little boy. His brown eyes darted from the door back to my unseen foe. He grappled for the key on his large ring, his hands shaking.

Was the creature with such a captivating voice really so terrifying?

“Trip.” I struggled against his constricting grip. “You’re going to have to let me go sometime.”

“Yes, rodent, you can’t hide behind the human forever.” The silky voice turned snide as it moved closer to me.

Trip whimpered. His panic caused my heart to race. I tried not to think about what atrocity was awaiting me. I fought harder against Trip’s grip until a warm breath on my ear caused me to freeze.

“Do struggle some more, human.” The voice became smooth again and my body fought between fear and delight. “Your fear does excite me so.”

I shook my head to clear it of the fog his voice elicited. Thinking back to my self-defense classes, I jerked an arm free of Trip’s biting grasp and jabbed an elbow at my assailant. Instead of hitting what I hoped was his face all I got was air. His dark laugh stroked something deep in my belly. He darted around to stay out of my sight as if it were all a game.

“Ye highness.” Mop stopped trying to get back in the door and stepped up to my unseen opponent.

Your highness? Could this be the ruler they were talking about?

“We weren’t tryin’ to smuggle her in. She followed us here.” Mop’s voice was shaky, but he tried to put on a brave face.

The delicious laughter halted. I stumbled when Trip was ripped from my body, allowing me the freedom to use my limbs again. Trip floated in the air before me, his eyes squeezed shut as he made his way from me to where the prince stood in his dark splendor.

From the deep ebony of his chest-length hair to his equally as black knee-high boots, he radiated temptation – and oh how I was tempted. Even the ice blue of his eyes glaring at my two companions added to his appeal.

He flicked a braid that trailed down the side of his face away to show glowing symbols that were identical to the ones in the cavern. I told myself my curiosity had everything to do with the marks and nothing to do with the lusciousness of his body. My eyes followed the swirls down his face, across his earring-filled pointed ear and down into the bottomless black of his open-chested, button-up shirt. When there were no more symbols to follow my imagination ran wild, causing my face to overheat.

How far down did they go?

“Now, now. No excuses.” The prince tsked, waving a long pale finger at them like a mother lecturing her children. “You know the rules. No humans.” His eyes swept up and down my body, making my insides ignite further under his gaze. “No matter how appealing they may be.”

“But, ye highness!” Mop choked out as if an invisible hand was tightening around his neck picking him up off the ground. “We be sendin’ her back!”

Mop and Trip’s feet kicked in the air as they fought to breathe. Seeing them struggling knocked me out of whatever hold the prince had on me. I marched over to his royal deliciousness and jerked on his shoulder, causing him to drop the two to the ground.

“Hey! Stop that.”

“What do you think you are doing?” His icy gaze flickered between light and dark blue as he turned to me and grabbed the hand that had shoved him.

“Let go!” I returned his glare with one of my own, trying to ignore the tingling sensation where his hand touched mine.

What was with this place? I’d never felt myself become so out of control of my feelings and actions as I did since the moment I’d darted out of my house after Trip. The weird part was I was starting to like the bold new me. That part of me marveled at the way the prince’s dark blue eyes contrasted with the angry, glowing burn of swirls on his face.

“Or you will do what exactly?” His voice was a low, dangerous growl.

As I stared into those mesmerizing eyes, I had the sudden urge to throw myself down at his feet and beg for mercy or death, whichever one

would please him. I shook my head to rid myself of the thoughts and glared at him. He laughed at my silence and drew me closer.

“You are not in your world anymore. Sweet. Innocent. Kat.” My name coming from his lips caused my insides to clench. He was threatening me, and I was acting like a damn cat in heat. What the hell was wrong with me?

Mop swore under his breath. The fact that he already knew my name was not a surprise. I had practically shouted it when I got here. The question was what would he do with it? Would he make me his slave? Make me clean his throne, or worse, his toilet?

Bleh. I would rather die, though being his love slave was an appealing thought.

I tried to jerk my hand from his pinching grasp, but he held on tight, keeping me at an uncomfortably close distance. He had me at a disadvantage, and I didn’t like my odds of escaping. That quiet, insecure part of me tried to poke its wary head out. What could I do against an almighty Fae prince anyway?

The longer I gazed into his eyes, the more I felt something pressing down on me. It was like I was in a room with too little air. My lungs burned, and my head felt like it was floating, as if more and more air was being sucked out every moment I stared into his dark, penetrating eyes. Eyes that were starting to get a bit hazy.

“Ye highness!” Mop’s outcry broke the hold the prince had on me. I gasped, taking a deep breath in. “Lady has made a blood oath with Teeth!”

As if remembering himself, the prince dropped my hand, and the glow of the glyphs on his face faded. I rubbed my wrist, breathing deeply as I stumbled back from him. He wasn’t like the others. Certainly not like the grumpy Mop or the jovial Trip. His mere presence caused my insides to burn. I fought between fear and wanting him all at once. The other Fae I’d met definitely never sparked such a reaction. The only thing they had ever caused was a headache.

“Someone has been very naughty indeed.” The dark prince’s tone teased, as he seemed to float around the courtyard. “How could you let a human follow you? I would think you would know better than that?” He eyed Trip who gave a pitiful whimper. “Certainly you did, troll?”

Mop didn’t even correct him, but instead he shot me a warning look when I opened my mouth to do so. Why would they let him treat them that

way? Was he really so fearsome? Remembering how he made me feel just moments ago answered my question. Yes. Yes, he was.

“Allowing said, human, to be bound to one of our own,” the prince continued, tapping Mop hard on the forehead and causing the brownie to wince. “And of course, it had to be on today of all days!” He bent down and grabbed Mop by the front of his overalls. “You do remember what today is, don’t you, troll?”

I gritted my teeth as I forced myself not to call foul on the prince. I painfully watched as fearless Mop cowered and stuttered before the royal.

“Of course, ye highness.”

“Then tell me, because I am confused as to why you thought it would be a good idea to leave the Underground on a day like today.” He rubbed his temple as if dealing with us was causing his head to ache.

Turning my eyes from the ever-curious prince, I waited to see if Mop would declare it all Trip’s fault. To my surprise, the brownie frowned down at the ground and mumbled an apology with no explanation. I peeked over at Trip to see if he was going to fess up, but he too only stared at the ground in quiet repentance. Well, if they weren’t going to tell, who was I to snitch?

The Fae Prince’s anger pulsed around him, and with it, the symbols flared back to life. The prince’s eyes flashed dark blue before his fury was wiped from his face and a smile took its place. And I thought Brandi was two faced.

He strolled over to me, tapping a finger to his chin. “What to do? What to do? I could just kill you and be done with it.”

“No!” We shouted in unison.

“Are you sure? It would be a mercy over taking your heads.” He tilted his head to the side, causing his hair to cascade over the side of his face. I would have thought it was adorable had he not been offering to mercy kill me.

I snuck a look at my quiet companions. If it was possible, the likelihood of losing their heads caused Mop and Trip to be even more petrified than before. Mop took his hat off and wrung it between his hands while Trip gripped his ears in his paws, pulling them around him like a shield.

“But then again, I do not know what the human promised the teeth for brains, and I do not want to be stuck fulfilling it by killing you.” His lips

twitched as his face filled with a cruel delight. “Besides, what fun would that be? There are so many more terrifying ways to die on your way out.”

He gripped my face in his hands. When my eyes locked with his, the familiar pressure threatened to take over me. I dug my nails into my hand, the pain pushing back the feeling of submission.

“If anything, one of the less welcoming Fae will get you and save me the trouble of dealing with you myself.” His icy voice matched his piercing eyes.

I had had enough. I hated bullies more than the coupon lady at the supermarket. Even if he was sinfully delicious, he couldn’t treat us like we were less than dirt.

I knocked his hand away from my face and snarled, “What crawled up your ass and died?”

“Lady!”

“No.” I ignored Mop’s horrified warning. “I want to know. You can’t just let him bully you.”

“Yea, he can. He can do what he likes.” Mop tried to pull me away from the prince, but I wouldn’t budge. I shoved down the chill crawling up my spine and waited for his answer.

The dark prince threw his head back and laughed, causing Mop and Trip to jump and quiver. He took a step closer to me, and I braced myself for whatever he had planned. He grabbed my hair in a painful grip, making me wince as he forced my face up to his.

“Tell me, dear Kat.” There was no teasing in his eyes now. They were hard and promised pain. “Would you really like to find out?”

“If that’s what it takes to get rid of you,” I spat in his face. My gaze was fierce and unyielding as he studied me for any signs of weakness. I tried not to flinch when he tightened his hold on my hair, causing a painful twinge in my neck.

Coming to his own conclusions, none pleasant I was sure, he laughed again before shoving me away. My feet failed me and I crashed to the ground. I glared up at him, dying for something to chuck at him.

“Get out of my sight before I decide to show you.” The prince, who I had yet to get a name for, turned his back on me.

“So, Trip is not going to be punished, Trip is not?” Trip’s voice was hopeful but wary.

The prince snatched Trip up by his ears, causing the white creature to shriek. He yanked Mop up by the back of his trousers and brought them close to the manic grin on his face.

“Of course you are. Do you think getting her out undetected will be easy?” He gave them a little shake. “I am not going to get blamed for your mess. Reaper only knows what that mad woman is thinking nowadays.”

Mop and Trip’s crestfallen faces perked up. As far as punishments went that wasn’t so bad. Maybe I misjudged the pointy-eared prince.

“But if you fail and the Queen finds out.” The prince flashed his canines. “You will wish I had killed you.”

I hadn’t.

“But that’s not fair!” I stomped my foot in protest.

“You know what is not fair?” The prince’s cold eyes focused back on me. “Being stuck in this God-forsaken place when I should be lounging in the palace!” His eye twitched as his rage triggered the swirls on his body. He gave a harsh laugh and waved us away. “Go. Be on your way.”

Mop and Trip ushered me toward one of the archways, but we paused when the prince called out again, “Oh, and one more thing. Stay out of the Seelie Court and away from that damn cat.”

Before I could ask what he meant my guides shoved me out of the hedged maze and toward a dark and ominous forest. I looked behind me. The prince’s shoulders slumped down, and he ran a tired hand through his hair. Maybe there was more to him than I originally thought.



AN OWL HOOTED IN THE distance as we made our way out of the hedges and into the eerie forest. The trees were snarled, blocking out any light from above and leaving us in a false twilight. The ground was mushy beneath my feet, but I couldn’t see them because a thick fog rolled across the ground. Was there no place here that wasn’t set up for a horror movie?

“Do you even know where we are going?” I picked a foot up and frowned down at the brown, muddy mess my tennis shoes had become.

Mop stopped at a tree and dug into a hiding place in the trunk. He shoved items around and threw a few out of the hole – a book, a miniature shovel, etc. Finally, he popped his head out of the hole.

“Aha!” He held up a large object almost twice his size. “Here be what we need – a lantern.”

“I can see that.” I put my hands on my hips and tapped my foot. “What I want to know is how we are going to get out of this place?” My shoulders tensed when laughter from beyond the trees filled the air. “What other terrifying ways was he talking about?”

Mop snorted. “Bah, don’t listen to him. He just be tryin’ to scare ye.”

“Well it’s working.”

Trip and I followed behind Mop, jumping at every sound and shadow. There were far too many eyes peeping out from the fog to feel safe even with a lantern.

It reminded me of the time I got talked into going to Scary Manor, a haunted house carnival, which happened every Halloween. I almost ended up with an assault charge when a guy with a chainsaw jumped out of the bushes. It was safe to say I was never invited back again, which was fine by me since my idea of fun was curling up with a good book, a glass of wine, and surrounded by a warm quilt. There was something certifiably wrong with people that paid to be scared. I was beginning to feel like I did back at the haunted house – irritated and altogether pissed off. I did not do scared well.

“Lady is right to be afraid, Lady is.” Trip gripped my hand. “His highness is unpredictable, he is. Might not kill Lady today, but might kill Lady tomorrow.”

“Is that why he’s so....” I trailed off not sure how to describe his split personality. I clenched my fists to keep from screaming as something moved in the bushes near me. Trip squeaked and I loosened my grip.

“Wishy-washy? Nah.” Mop shook his head. “He can’t be helpin’ that; that be due to the magic bindin’ him.”

“Oh, you mean the symbols on his face?” I really wished I had some paper to copy or my phone to take a picture. The one time it wasn’t permanently glued to my hand and I actually needed it.

I tilted my head a little as my companions gaped at me. “What?”

“Ye can see them?”

“You mean the swirly-glowy symbols running down his face?” I gestured to the left side of my own face. “Yeah. Can’t you?”

“Well, yea. ‘Course.” Mop scratched his head. “We be Fae, but ye just a human. Ye shouldn’t be able to see them.”

“But I could see them back at the cavern too. All over the ground and walls.”

“Aha!” A smile spread onto Trip’s face, and his tail whipped around behind him. “Trip not lead Lady to Underground. Lady finds it on her own, Lady did.” Trip hopped around me, making me dizzy from tracking him. “It not Trip’s fault, it’s not! His highness may let Trip and Mop go. His highness might!”

“I doubt it. He wouldn’t care whose fault it be, only that we be there. So, we be gettin’ the blame.” Mop turned back to the path only he could see.

I frowned at Mop’s pessimism. What kind of ruler would put the blame on the wrong party just so there was someone to blame? I liked the prince less and less.

“So, the symbols are binding him to this place? Who put them there?” My eyes stared out into the darkness surrounding us, ready for anything that might pounce.

“The Queen did.” Mop handed me the lantern as he climbed over a fallen log.

“The Queen? You mean his mother? That’s horrible!” Even my mother, for all her faults, wouldn’t stoop so low. At least I hoped not.

“Not our queen. The Seelie Queen.” Mop scoffed like I should have known.

“But why?” I handed the lantern back to him.

“His highness made a mistake, his highness did. His highness is being punished, he is. Just like Trip and Mop are being punished.” Trip’s tail drooped down, his face crestfallen and pathetic.

“What did he do?” I thought back to the despair that lingered on the striking prince’s face. What had made him so sad? Was being trapped here so bad?

“How am I supposed to know? I’m just a brownie, not his royal confidant.” Mop placed his hands on his hips and scowled. “If ye want to know so bad, ask him yer self.”

I so didn’t want to do that. The less time I spent in his royal haughtiness’s presence, the better off I would be. My head was hurting from the contradicting information I was getting.

I had a cursed prince and a queen that may or may not be crazy, but not their queen, and not to forget the possibility of losing my head, which was a

fate worse than death. Just a typical day in Wonderland – or Underground, whatever this place was.

Bringing my thoughts together, I remembered something else the nasty prince had said. “What day is it?”

“Thursday,” Mop grunted.

I rolled my eyes at his avoidance to my question. “You know what I mean. What did he mean today of all days? What’s so special about today?”

“Oh, that.” The brownie mulled. “It be the anniversary of the princess’s death.”

“And that means?”

“The whole Underground be in a state of mourning,” Mop snorted. “Like we haven’t been mourning for the last century. Life goes on.”

“So, it’s like a national holiday?”

“No, Lady.” Trip tugged on my hand. “No holiday. It’s like...like...” he trailed off, his face scrunched up hard.

“Don’t hurt ye self, Trip,” Mop interrupted. “The whole Underground be under lockdown. We ain’t supposed to be havin’ fun, workin’ or even leavin’ the kingdom.” He glared at Trip for the first time, showing his disapproval of his friend’s adventures in my garden.

“Trip is sorry, Trip is.” The white-furred creature’s ears wilted under Mop’s gaze.

Mop rolled his eyes as if he was used to hearing Trip’s apologies. “Anyway, his highness only be worried ‘cause the queen be blamin’ us UnSeelie for her daughter’s death.” Mop snorted. “Like we be havin’ any say in the matter.”

“How’d she die?”

“Ye’d have to ask his highness that one. It not be my place to tell.” The brownie paused by a tree, looking around for a moment before turning to his left.

“Why’s that?” I hurried to stay close to him. I didn’t want to get lost in the woods. Not that Mop and Trip counted much for protection, but they were all I had and beggars can’t be choosers.

Before Mop could answer there was a loud outcry of laughter over the next brush. Not at all bothered by the insanity we were hearing, Mop lifted his shoulder in a matter-of-fact way. “She be his betrothed, of course. Or was.”

“Of course,” I murmured to myself.

It made sense. The prince would know how his fiancé died, but what didn't make sense was why the Seelie Queen thought it was the UnSeelie's fault? Did the prince kill her? With his temper I could see some kind of domestic abuse going on.

I didn't understand women who got themselves into those situations. If a man ever tried to hit me, he'd have a head full of lead and one less appendage for the afterlife.

I almost ran into Mop when he stopped before a collection of bushes. The laughter around us grew louder and seemed to be coming from beyond the bushes. I was afraid to ask my next question, knowing the answer was probably worse than my imagination.

"Who's that?"

"Trip's cousin, it is!" Trip hopped ahead of us with his ears and tail whipping around him. "Come, Lady! Hare will help. Yes, Hare will."

"Hare?" My brow furrowed.

It couldn't be, could it?

I had all but given up on the idea of Wonderland, especially after Mop's vicious denial. But if Hare was here, I had no doubt what would be on the other side of those bushes. Nothing good ever came from that scenario.

"Come on before Trip hurts himself." Mop waved me over to the brush.

I hesitated as another round of maniacal laughter filled the air. A sense of foreboding washed over me. What was I getting myself into?



Chapter 6

Have Some Tea

THE MOMENT I pushed through the bushes the manic laughter came to a screeching halt. It was so quiet I could hear my heart beating in my chest. After a moment of intense observation, the crazed laughter began again as if I had never interrupted it.

The laughter was coming from the tea party's three occupants. Though, the rest of the woods were covered in a dense fog, it seemed to cut off right at the edge of the dimly lit dining table. There were eight chairs around the table, all mismatched and looking very much out of place in the middle of the forest.

Trip and Mop stopped next to the head of the table, where a creature that could have been Trip's twin, save for the bloodshot eyes and red-tinged fur, sat on the right hand side. I had to assume the doppelganger was Trip's cousin, Hare.

The other two occupants of the table were just as bizarre as my own companions. A child-sized bat, with wings that twinkled in the light, sat at one end of the table. He had a clawed pinky up in the air as he sipped from a cracked teacup. Curious eyes watched me as I moved around the table. I found it oddly amusing that the bat felt the need to show such decorum at a tea party full of mismatched cups and a moth-eaten, stained tablecloth. Who was he trying to impress?

The bat's neighbor had no such illusions of grandeur. Next to the bat, at the end of the table, was a mouse the size of a full-grown bulldog picking its nose. It twitched said nose at me before opening a blue door latched to the front of its body. Its heart visibly thudded as he scratched his small intestine with one of his paws. A small alarming sound came out of me when he reached between his stomach and diaphragm to pull out a cup and saucer. His little black eyes glinted as his companions and he cackled at my horror.

Letting out a shaky breath, I plopped down in a chair next to Hare. My stomach gave an unhappy grumble. I'd never been one for blood and guts.

My friend's delivery room was as close to carnage as I had allowed myself, and that had been pushing it.

"So you two are cousins?" I let out a nervous laugh, trying to distract myself from what I'd seen. "What exactly are you anyway?"

Unlike Trip, whose demeanor was more child-like, Hare couldn't have been more different. There was something disturbing about the way his bloodshot eyes gazed at me, like he was wondering what my insides tasted like.

"Trip and Hare is opalaughts." Trip's tail swished back and forth behind him. I couldn't see Hare's tail to see if he was as happy as Trip was to see him, but if it was anything like his partially chewed ears, I didn't think I wanted to.

"Hop-a-lots? Because you're like rabbits?" My eyes questioned the unusually quiet Mop. He shrugged his small shoulders and slumped down further into his chair. What was his problem?

"No, no. Not hop-a-lots! Opalaughts. And Trip not like rabbit at all, Trip is not." Trip crawled into the chair across from me and grabbed a moldy looking sandwich off the table.

Seriously? Didn't they have any normal food? My stomach rolled as Trip munched on his sandwich, red goop, which vaguely resembled blood, oozed out of the sides. On second thought, even if they did, I didn't think I could eat any of it. The thought of eating alone made me want to hurl.

Holding back the bile that had built up in my throat, I choked out, "But you eat carrots like rabbits."

"Not the same." When Hare smiled, his sharpened canines peeked out of his mouth. He pushed a plate of sandwiches toward me.

I gave into the urge to lift the edge of the sandwich and immediately wished I hadn't. The red ooze coming out of Trip's sandwich was indeed blood. It was gelled around chunks of some kind of raw meat. What kind of meat? I wasn't sure I wanted to know, but my stomach decided it had had enough. I covered my mouth and dashed for the bushes. The door mouse and bat chattered behind me.

"Oh, what a shame."

"Not very tame."

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, pulling my hair off of my neck. Still a bit shaky, I walked back to the table and grabbed the nearest chair, which ended up being at the head of the table. Before I could even sit

down, Hare jumped up on the table, his grungy fur standing on end as he hissed at me.

"No! Not there."

"Hatter's chair!" The door mouse growled, gripping the edge of the table.

The bat didn't seem very interested but said his part anyway, "It's not really fair."

"Okay." I drew out the word, holding my hands up in defense. "I'll just go sit back over there." All the rhyming was making my head hurt. Once I was seated again, Hare nudged a cracked, pink teacup and saucer toward me.

"Here, have some tea."

I held the cup between my fingers and sniffed its contents. It smelled like normal tea, but then again, nothing here was normal. I brought the cup to my lips but paused when the other two didn't pipe in. Their eyes were focused on the cup in my hand as if waiting for something. I sat the cup back down on its saucer, suspicion rearing its ugly head.

The door mouse took a sip of his own tea and gestured to mine. "It's really lovely tea!"

"So sleepy you will be." The bat yawned beside me.

There it was. The little cretins were trying to roofie me! I shoved the cup as far from me as possible while trying to keep my anger under control. Keep calm. Don't antagonize the animals, Kat.

"No, thank you," I said through clenched teeth.

"No, no. You must have some tea!" Hare pushed the cup toward me again, his eyes demanding me to do as he said.

"It'd be rude, you see!"

"Eaten you will be!"

Mouse and Hare glared at the bat. Who yawned and ate a sandwich from one of the plates, unaware of his companions' ire.

"Stop it, ye rhymin' buffoons." Mop finally jumped in, shoving Hare away. "She don't want no stinkin' tea. She just needs the key. Blast it! Now I be doin' it!"

"What key?" Hare went back to sipping his tea as if they hadn't just tried to poison me.

"Not that key?" Dubious eyes glanced at one another around the table.

“Where could it be?” The bat barked out laughing, causing the other two to join him until the entire clearing was filled with that uncanny fanatic laughter.

There was no question they were all mad. No way did I trust their word on anything. Unfortunately, I was out of my element and didn’t have much choice but to follow Mop and Trip’s lead. If Mop said I needed a key, and then I was going to get that key.

I grabbed Hare by the ears, startling the opalaught into silence. Giving him my best scowl, I brought him up to eye level. This was my ‘I wasn’t going to deal with anymore of his bullshit’ glare that I liked to use on the preteens at work when they started to get too obnoxious. It worked like a charm. I just hoped it worked as well on Fae as it did thirteen-year-old teenagers.

“We need that key.” I gnashed my teeth at him.

“We don’t have the key.” Hare glared back at me, not at all intimidated. Maybe my scowl needed some work.

“Key’s not here, you see.”

“I know,” I interjected before the bat could jump in with his part. “You said all that. If it’s not here, then where is it?”

Hare exchanged a look with his tablemates as confusion filled their faces. “No key since she.”

“Yes, she had the key!” Mouse waved his chipped cup in an exaggerated manner.

“Alice! Alice! She be!”

“There’s that damn name again. Do ye wanna lose ye heads too?” Mop’s warning had the opposite effect on the demented Fae around us.

“Head! Head! Alice lost her head!” Hare threw his body so he swung back and forth in my hand, making my arm hurt enough to drop him.

“Who needs a head?” Mouse cackled.

“Maybe he’ll take yours instead!”

“What do we do now?” I grabbed my hair in my hands, yanking on it. “We can’t just stay here.”

The forest wasn’t particularly homey, and I couldn’t imagine staying here with these loons. It was worse than my sister’s sorority house. I would rather roofie myself.

“Now hold ye horses. We just need to be findin’ her to get the key.” Mop plopped down in a chair with a thump.

“Her? But I thought she lost her head? How is a dead girl going to help?” I had a horrid thought. “We aren’t going to rob her grave, are we?”

“Don’t be stupid. No one said she was dead.” Mop sniffed.

“Where I come from you can’t be alive without a head,” I pointed out to them, the very thought of a headless Alice gave me the creeps.

Trip giggled in his seat. “Lady forgets where Lady is. Lady is only human in Underground, Lady is.”

“Only human!” Hare giggled, his companions following along.

“We like human!”

“Taste nice with cumin.”

“Is ye stomach the only thing ye can think ‘bout?” Mop paused when a hoot broke through the trees and Mr. Blue Eyes landed on a branch near us. “He already knows she be here. We need to get her outta here before the queen be findin’ out too.”

Without warning, Mop jumped up onto the table and grabbed the teapot. I could feel the air around the party thicken as Mop held the pot high above his head. Bloodshot and beady eyes alike were pinned to the kettle in Mop’s hands.

“Tell me where she be or ye will get no more tea!” Mop grimaced when his words once again came out in rhyme.

A collective outcry was heard around the table as they all began talking at once. It would have been funny except for the wildness that appeared in their eyes at the thought of losing their precious tea. I thought I was addicted to caffeine.

“Hold on, hold on! Don’t be talkin’ all at once!” Mop held the pot in one hand and pointed at the bat. “You! Twinkle!”

Of course. Why wouldn’t a bat be named Twinkle? I couldn’t help but snicker at the name, earning me a glare from Twinkle.

“Yes?” If his eyes were not focusing on the pot with such intensity, I would have said he was bored.

“Where be...” Mop lowered his voice, his eyes looking back and forth for eavesdroppers. “...Alice?”

“We don’t know.”

I waited for the chime of the rhyming that usually followed but was disappointed when there was none. Maybe it was only a game? Were they only serious when there was something to lose?

“Fartnarkles.” Mop let out an aggravated breath.

We weren't getting anywhere. I leaned on the arm of my chair, my eyes wandering around the table. Finally, they landed on the largest chair at the head of the table – Hatter's chair.

"Where's the Hatter?"

My question caused Hare's grungy ears to perk up at my question. "He knows! He knows!"

"Who? The Hatter?"

"Yes, yes!" The Hare bounced onto the table, eager eyes on the pot in Mop's grasp.

"Well, where'd he go?" Mop tightened his grip on the pot at the opalaught's presence. His dark eyes filled with panic when the other two partygoers joined him on the table. They stalked Mop, their eyes becoming fiercer the closer they came.

"To get some more tea!"

"Yes. He had to pay the fee!" Mouse licked his chops as they closed in on the brownie.

"Got lost in the foggy sea!" Twinkle exclaimed just before they pounced.

I cackled at the scuffle on the table. Small legs and arms were thrown everywhere as they tried to get a hand on the teapot. I should have stopped them, I really should have, but instead I found myself laughing at the sight.

"Get off me, ye rodent!" Mop shoved them back while trying to keep the teapot out of their reach. His desperate eyes pinned on me. "Whatcha smilin' at? Help me!"

Smiling?

I frowned as I realized I had been smiling. It wasn't amusing. I didn't find other's suffering funny. For just a brief second I found myself wondering what would happen if I let them have him. Would they eat him up? String him by his feet as they drained him of his fluids to make their precious tea?

I frowned harder, shaking my head. Those weren't my thoughts. What was wrong with me?

"Lady." Trip pulled on the sleeve of my sweatshirt. "Lady needs Mop to find the Hatter, Lady does."

Uncrossing my legs, I sighed. Though I was weirdly enjoying their fighting over the mysterious tea, I still needed the grumpy little man. I

reached a hand into the pile that had become their bodies and grabbed a hold of the first red clothes I could see.

I pulled Mop out of the pile of hissing creatures and set him down on the ground. Mop swept up his hat that had fallen off in the fray and tugged it back onto his head. The rest of the pile never noticed his absence. They were too busy playing a game of tug of war over the teapot. It seemed like the door mouse was going to win before Hare snatched it away and hopped back to his seat.

“My tea!”

“Almost my tea!” The door mouse sulked back to his own chair; his rhyme less enthused than it was before.

“Curses on thee!” Twinkle glared at Hare, who sat in a triumphant glow, stroking the pot with a paw.

It wasn't hard to figure out that the teapot decided who was in charge of everything, including the conversation. I imagined that was why they were so keen on getting it. Whose sick idea was that? To be forced to talk only when the leader talked and only about what he wanted to talk about? Hare had obviously been in control for a while, and it was probably getting old. If I were them, I would just leave, but then again maybe they couldn't?

“What now?” I turned to Mop, who was cursing up a storm next to me.

“That!” Mop gestured out into the fog.

It seemed to have gotten worse while we had our little visit. It was so dense I couldn't make out more than a few feet in front of me and that was with a lantern. Getting lost out there would be a nightmare. Who knew what kind of baddies hid in its cover?

“It'll take forever to search this mess for Hatter.” I followed Mop's gaze as it darted toward the owl that had been tailing us from the beginning. What was with that owl? “I doubt we be havin' that much time left.”

“So, what do we do?” I held my hands up to the brownie in question.

“Hare knows!” Trip jumped in. “Hare knows where Hatter goes for tea, Hare does.”

We all turned to look at Hare. He didn't even glance up from the teacup with which he was having a hushed conversation. Maybe it wasn't just the tea making them all mad.

“They want to know where he's at,” Hare spoke into his cup.

“Where's he at?” The door mouse, which had been fiddling with his doorknob, looked to Hare with interest.

“Yes. Where is he at?” Tinkle quirked a nonexistent brow at Hare.

“Would ye just tell us?” Mop grabbed the cup from Hare’s hand. Slamming it down on the table, its essence spilled onto the cloth. I had a brief moment where I thought ‘Oh what a shame’ before I shoved it down. This place was really messing with my head.

Hare’s eyes were hard as he hissed, “He’s with the Smiling Cat.”

“Oh, that’s where he’s at!” The door mouse fiddled with his handle once more as if he’d known all along.

“He’s crazier than a bat!” Twinkle giggled at his joke.

“Great, just great!” Mop threw his hands up in the air. “Just what we need, someone else to be wastin’ our time.”

“They aren’t talking about the Cheshire Cat are they?” I had a sudden image of a fat striped cat with a grin the size of his face.

“Come on, let’s go.” Mop ignored my question and grabbed the discarded lantern, following an unseen path deeper into the forest.

“But, Mop!” Trip clamored after the brownie. “His highness said not—”

“I know what he said. But it ain’t like we got a choice, now do we?”

“Trip guess not, Trip does.”

Someone had better start answering my questions soon or I was going to get pissed. I wasn’t used to having so many questions with none of the answers. I exchanged a searching look with Trip before we chased after the grumbling brownie.

It seemed all I was doing lately was running, but at that moment, I would do almost anything to get away from the tea party. I wasn’t sure what was wrong with me, but staying there was not going to help me become any saner. I kept that thought in mind as we left the party’s occupants behind, their annoying rhyming following in our wake.

“Ungrateful brats!”

“Useless gnats!”

“Hey, where’s my hat?”



Chapter 7

Cheshire S. Cat

“NO GOOD, PAIN in the arse, feline! Don’t know why it had to be him!” Mop grumbled as he stomped his feet with every step he took. “Worse than a dingle berry bat.”

I strolled along behind the angry brownie, becoming more amused by the minute at the creative insults with which he was coming up with. I had yet to meet the Smiling Cat, but I was already looking forward to it. If Teeth didn’t cause Mop to fret, how bad could the Cheshire Cat really be?

“Why do you hate the Cheshire Cat so much? He’s just a cat who speaks in riddles, right?” At least that was what I remembered from the book.

My eyes darted to the foggy trees when something growled. I jumped and screamed when something slimy brushed my leg in the fog. I hugged myself as the dark laughed at me. Damn it. I hated sounding like one of those defenseless girls that needed to be saved all the time. If only I had a weapon, then we’d see who was laughing.

“I could do with a good old-fashioned riddle right now,” I muttered to myself.

“Smiling Cat is not all bad, Smiling Cat’s not.” Trip gripped the edge of my sweatshirt. “But Mop hates Smiling Cat something fierce!”

“Why’s that?” I turned to Trip, trying to distract myself from the creepy eyes in the forest shadows.

Trip opened his mouth to speak, but Mop beat him to it.

“I’ll tell ye why!” The lantern in his hand swung wild in the air. “That damn cat only thinks of himself and what he can get outta it.”

“But isn’t that the way all Fae are?” I gestured to the two of them. “You guys are only helping me because his royal douchiness would kill you otherwise, right?”

“Lady must not talk of his highness in such a way, Lady must not!” Trip’s wide eyes searched the trees. “He will take Lady’s head, he will!”

“It’s not like he is going to hear me, you know.” I patted Trip’s head like you would to reassure a child who said something silly.

“Lady never knows, Lady doesn’t,” the opalaught whispered ominously.

“Anyway, the Cheshire Cat can’t be any worse than your sorry excuse for a prince.” Our feathery shadow gave an irritated twitter as if it were him I had been insulting.

Mop’s eyes stared down at the ground, a frown between his brows. “Nah, but he be a close second.” His gaze snapped to mine. “And ye’re right. We were just helpin’ ye to save ourselves, but that was before.”

“And now?”

“Ye’re more than just a stinkin’ human now.” His large lips curled into the first hint of a smile I had seen since my adventure began.

“Gee, thanks.” I rolled my eyes at the backward compliment. I rated higher than a flea. Great.

“Trip liked Lady before, Trip did!” The opalaught beamed up at me as his tail wagged in the air. “Lady has yummy carrots, though Lady makes them very hard to get to. That fence hurt Trip’s teeth, it did.”

“But, Trip, you just said you only liked me for my carrots,” I pointed out. “Besides, if I don’t get out of here, there won’t be any more carrots for you to eat.”

Trip opened his mouth to protest but then quickly closed it. His tail drooped down to the ground as he processed my logic. It was a good thing I didn’t tell him that it was him I had been trying to keep out. I didn’t think his little heart would be able to handle it.

“Lady is right, Lady is. Trip is sorry.”

I patted the fur between his ears. “It’s okay. Humans are the same way.” I bent down to his level and crooked a finger at him. “I’ll tell you a secret, though.”

Trip’s ears perked up, and his nose twitched in anticipation. Mop huffed, tapping his foot in apparent impatience. I glared at him and turned back to Trip. Mop would just have to keep his trousers on.

I tapped a finger on the tip of Trip’s pink nose. “I like Trip too.”

“Bah! We don’t have time for this. Besides, ye don’t know nothin’.” Mop picked up the lantern and continued on his way. “Ye think humans are self-servin’, but ye haven’t met this cat. He’s manipulative, cunnin’, and two-faced. He always has another agenda.” He ticked each trait off on his hand. “In short, he can’t be trusted.”

“Plus, Smiling Cat cheats at cards, Smiling Cat does.” Trip gave a solemn nod.

“Really?” I giggled at the seriousness they were giving the accusation. “That’s why you don’t like him? Isn’t that a little petty?”

“Not just ‘cos he cheats!” Mop huffed. “When he does lose, he finds every excuse not to be keepin’ his part of the deal!”

“Sounds like my sister,” I grumbled to myself. “Why doesn’t your prince want us to see him? Did he play cards with him too?”

“No. No.” Trip shook his head. “His highness would never play cards with the Smiling Cat, his highness wouldn’t.”

“Why not? Too good for him?” I snorted. I could see the dark-haired prince thinking just that. He was someone who couldn’t be bothered to spend time with the commoners; it might ruin his dark and sexy image.

“He be royalty,” Mop stated as if the prince’s station was a logical answer.

“So? Doesn’t he give any thought to his fellow man—uh, Fae? A good ruler knows his people. He doesn’t just lounge around shouting orders and expect to be obeyed.” I placed my hands on my hips, trying to give off an air of confidence.

Mop and Trip barked out laughing. Trip grabbed his ears in his hands and rocked back and forth, almost to the point of balling up into himself. Mop slapped his thigh, his chuckles causing the lantern to shake in his hand.

Frowning, I dropped my arms. “What’s so funny?”

The brownie wiped a tear from his eye. “Ye are. If anyone be shouting orders at anyone, it’d be the Queen to him. I highly doubt he be havin’ the time to lounge ‘round, as ye call it, in over a century.”

“No. No lounging for his highness, no.” Trip gave a small, sad shake of his head.

“Okay.” The word came out slow and unsure. I wasn’t really following their explanation. The prince was a prince to be feared, but he also was a prince who didn’t have any power? It didn’t make sense.

“And as far as Chess, well not everyone agrees with his reputation so to speak.” Mop gave an awkward chuckle.

“Reputation?” I quirked a brow, my interest increasing exponentially.

“Just wait. Ye’ll see what I mean.” Mop waved me off, pushing a tree branch out of his way to reveal another clearing.

The clearing itself was untouched by the fog, which seemed to fill the rest of the forest. It cut off just at the tree line, creating a perfectly circular outline of milky white. I wished I had that kind of lawn control.

While the tea party had a sort of ominous lighting, in this clearing it was like the clouds had opened up just enough to illuminate the area. In the middle of the clearing, sparkling in the sunlight, was a large willow tree. Its long, fuchsia vines were covered in bright violet leaves. They hung all along each side and reached down to brush the ground.

Mop stopped at the wall of vines as if waiting for something. The vines rippled and whispered, even though there was no wind to move them, and then the vines pulled back, opening like a curtain. A lone vine whipped inward as if to welcome us inside.

Mr. Blue Eyes didn't follow us into the depths of the tree. He landed on a tree branch outside the clearing, hooting and ruffling his feathers in an agitated manner. I had a feeling he didn't approve of our destination. It made me doubt that the cat was the kind of help we wanted.

My eyes wandered about the tree as I tried to take everything in. I felt like I just stepped out of a demented kid's nightmare and into a sugary fairylane. There was no longer a squishy floor, or gnashing teeth, or a table full of tea-addicted animals. Once inside the willow branches, I discovered exactly what I always imagined Wonderland to be.

Luminescent, emerald green grass carpeted the ground in place of the fog-covered dirt. Flowers were scattered across the grass in every hue and color. A path of grass lined by bright pink mushrooms trailed up from the willow vines to the base of the tree where a lone figure was splayed out on a high-backed chair. He was enwrapped in the fuchsia-colored vines, which appeared to be more of a throne, especially with the way its owner lounged upon it.

One eggplant-painted leg, encased in a matching knee-high boot, was thrown over the side while the other stretched out along the ground. The tightness of his pants caused a slight heat to rise to my cheeks. There was no mistaking what gender their owner was. I tried my best not to stare, but the multitude of extravagant leather and fur belts wrapped around his waist made it impossible to cast my attention elsewhere.

"As much as I enjoy your ogling of my goods. And I do enjoy a good ogle." Though, he was still a few feet away, when the figure purred I felt it sliding up my spine. "What is it that you humans say? Oh yes." Fighting the

need to shiver, I watched as a clawed hand, which was holding a leather riding crop, pointed up to his face. “My eyes are up here.”

I followed the riding crop up along the expansion of his well-defined abs, and over his muscular vest-covered chest, and locked onto big, crystal green orbs, circled by long pale lashes. A straight nose led the way down to a fang-tipped smile. I had the sudden urge to say ‘Oh my!’ but swallowed it as quickly as it came up.

“There’s a pet.” Pale pink and purple striped cat-like ears twitched on top of a head of long, pale pink hair that had been braided over one shoulder and hung down to his waist.

Mop snorted next to me as he glared at our host, who unwrapped himself from his throne. His slender form glided toward us, one foot in front of the other like a large feline stalking his prey. The furry pink and purple striped belt unwound from his waist and flicked in the air behind him, but his eyes never left mine.

This beautiful creature couldn’t be the Cheshire Cat? He looked like he belonged in a rock band as opposed to the middle of a Fae forest. I gulped as I realized the tingling in my spine was still there. I was in trouble.

“Well, isn’t this a lively bunch?” His eyes crinkled at the corners as he took in our raga band group.

Mop, who had an irritated frown, crossed his arms and glowered at the Fae. Meanwhile, Trip just stood there with a content grin on his face as he played with his tail. As for me, I was fighting the need to melt into a pile of goop on the floor.

Stepping toward me, he wrapped his tail around my waist and drew me into him. I held my hands up to ward him off and ended up touching the hard surface of his bare chest. My fingers had a mind of their own, and before I could stop myself, they began to trace the faint scars that marred his skin. A purr rumbled through his chest and into my hands. I jerked back and my already red face became as hot as a tamale.

Dropping my hands seemed like a bad idea, because I would’ve been touching him more intimately than I would’ve liked. I decided to wrap my arms around myself in a hug in hopes that it would somehow protect me.

The laugh from my captor reverberated out of him and vibrated down into the tail wrapped around my waist. Similar to the prince, his laugh made my toes curl and parts of me feel hot with need. What was it about the Fae men that affected me so? Why did they all look like they came out of Wet

Dreams 'R' Us, while the rest of the UnSeelie Court's occupants were deranged animals?

"Aren't you a peach?" He purred in my ear and pressed the length of the riding crop against my lower back, drawing me against him. His nose trailed into my hair as he inhaled my scent. "Do you taste just as good as you look?"

My breath caught in my throat as the tip of his nose slid across the side of my neck. I didn't know what was going on, but I felt like I was losing IQ points with every new male Fae I met.

I wasn't some blushing virgin. I had boyfriends in the past. Hell! I'd even had friends with benefits, but for some reason, I couldn't explain why my insides quivered with every touch of his clawed hands. I even reacted weirdly when the prince gripped my arm. It hurt, but in a good way. Not that I would have admitted it out loud.

"Knock it off, ye lech! She ain't here for that!" Mop's grouchy voice broke through whatever spell the cat had me under.

I shook my head to clear it and jolted back from the body still pressed up against mine. Space was good. Lots of space. The toothy grin I received as I moved away only solidified my desire to not let him touch me again.

"So, you're the Cheshire Cat?" I cleared my throat and tried to pretend he didn't affect me. I forced my eyes up to his face when they tried to wander back down to the bare skin of his chest. Eye contact. Eye contact was good.

"Cheshire S. Cat, but you, my lovely sweet," he bowed to me, grabbing my hand before I could object, "...may call me Chess." His mouth snaked across the back of my hand, the tip of his tongue tasting the skin there.

His tongue was slightly rougher than a human's, kind of like a cat's. A vision of what else he could do with his tongue popped into my mind before I squashed it. I was so not going there.

"Great." I snatched my hand back, rubbing it on my shorts as if it would remove the tingling his mouth left there.

Chess made a satisfied purr deep in his throat, and the pink tip of his tongue danced across his lips. "You do taste as good as you look." His crystal eyes trailed down my bare legs, making me fidget in place.

The feral look in his eyes could've been food or sex. It was hard to tell the difference, which I guess was true for most men. Apparently, the Fae

weren't that different from humans in that aspect.

I watched his clawed hand stroke his chest in a sensual manner and gulped. Sex, definitely sex.

I really didn't see what was so appealing about me. I was short. I didn't have nice long legs, and I was wearing my least attractive pajamas. My breasts were all right sized. I didn't have a flat butt, but I also wasn't winning any awards for it. My eyes were too narrow and my nose too pointed. I had freckles on every inch of my face. The only time I used makeup was to cover them up in the summer months when the sun made them stand out even more. I was average on a large scale. The only thing I had going for me was my thick copper hair. It was not quite straight nor was it curled, leaving it impossible to fashion in any way that was presentable. For some reason, it drew more attention than I liked, even with my mediocre features.

Was it just the fact that I was human that made them interested, or were all Fae men perverts? I was betting on perverts.

"Don't mind the cat. He be all bark and no bite." Mop frowned harder, if that was possible, at the leering feline.

"Now that's not true. I've been known to bite in some situations." He smirked at me before he turned back to Mop. "And I'm hurt that you would think so little of me." Chess closed his eyes and gripped his chest with a hand in a dramatic pose.

"No, ye ain't. Stop ye foolin'. We ain't got time for none of ye games."

"But all of life's a game." Chess tried to pick up my hand again, but I stepped back. Not to be deterred, he grabbed a strand of my hair and wrapped it around his finger as he grinned. "Only some of us are lucky enough to know whose playing. Would you like to play with me, my little kitty Kat?" He gave my hair a little tug, causing me to 'eep' at the sharp sting.

"Uh." This guy just didn't give up! I could see why the prince didn't like him. If I didn't watch it, he'd have me out of my shorts before I knew it.

"Yea, yea." Mop thankfully interjected, placing himself between me and the flirtatious cat. "Like I said, we ain't got no time, not with it being what day it is."

"Oh?" Chess' coy grin dipped down in a thoughtful frown, and his ears twitched on his head. "I'd imagine not. I'm surprised you have gotten this

far with your delectable guest smelling the way she does. I can imagine he is not too happy about that.” For the first time since we arrived, he turned his gaze from me to somewhere beyond the willow tree’s curtain of vines as if he could see something we couldn’t.

“In fact, let us take this little party into my humble abode.” He turned on his heel toward his throne. “You never know who could be listening.” He gave me a cheeky grin before walking right through the trunk of the tree.

Gone!

Just like that!

There was no door or poof of smoke. I didn’t know why I was surprised. Mop and Trip certainly didn’t seem impressed. In fact, they followed suit, disappearing into the tree to whatever lie beyond its bark.

The last couple of times I had gone through a portal without knowing what was on the other side, I’d ended up worse off than I was before. I was tired of leaps of faith and even more so of not knowing what the hell was going on. I was usually the one with all the answers.

I was the one people turned to for help, not the other way around. I didn’t like feeling helpless and out of control. It was possible that the slight change in my personality had to do with my unease, but I had a suspicion it was a lot more than that. If only I knew what.

Chess’ head popped out of the side of the tree, startling me out of my thoughts. “Don’t do that!”

I glared at the head that seemed to be floating in the air. Was that where the story got started? Had Alice stood in this very place, too young to understand what she was seeing? And if she was still in Wonderland, how did Lewis Carrol even hear her story?

“Are you coming, pet?” He held out a clawed hand at my hesitancy. “Do not be afraid. Come on inside.”

“Said the spider to the fly,” I muttered to no one in particular before I placed my hand in his and was tugged inside.



Chapter 8

Changes & Shadows

“WHAT’S WRONG WITH what I’m wearing?” I opened my arms and twisted around to see what was so distasteful.

While I wasn’t wearing my most flattering pajamas, I could’ve still gone to Walmart and been more fashionable than the majority of its customers. I would’ve been more outraged if I had thought Chess was ogling my bits as he liked to call them, but his eyes were all business as they scrutinized my clothes.

“While your legs are quite delicious to look at, not all parts of the Underground are as warm as this forest.” He picked at the sleeve of my sweatshirt and grimaced. “And your ensemble does leave something to be desired.”

“Well excuse me if I didn’t have time to primp myself before I chased after what I thought was a rabbit!” I huffed and crossed my arms over my chest.

“You are a little spit fire, aren’t you?” Chess chuckled as he moved into his expansive walk-in closet. From where I stood in the middle of his bedroom, the wardrobe was easily triple the size of my own closet and had rows upon rows of clothes and shoes piled throughout.

I couldn’t imagine having so many clothes – slacks for work, jeans or sweats for home. What else did a girl need?

The way most people felt about going to the dentist was how I felt about trying on clothes; it was a necessary evil and should only be done when there was no other option. I could’ve counted the number of times I’d gone shopping in the last year on one hand, and I still would’ve had five left.

While I waited for the cat to find my new ensemble, I took in the massive expansion that was his room. Next to the closet, a long purple chaise sat to one side near a three-way mirror. In front of the mirror was a small, round dais that you would see in a bridal store. The thought of Chess standing in front of the mirror turning this way and that as he admired himself caused a giggle to slip out of my mouth.

“Did you say something?” Chess called out from the closet.

“Uh—” I coughed, covering up my giggles. “No, nothing. Just admiring your room.”

“Oh?” His voice held a hint of humor at my obvious lie before his voice turned teasing. “Do make yourself comfortable. The bed is especially soft and the sheets feel delightful against your skin.”

My eyes trailed over to the bed he was describing. A large, four-poster bed that was covered in silk sheets and a fur-lined duvet looked like it promised everything he said and more. A mental image of Chess wrapped in nothing but those sheets caused my face to heat up. I shook my head to dispel the image and chastised myself for letting the perverted Fae rub off on me.

The inside of his bedroom was just like the rest of the willow. It screamed Chess in a very severe way. Fur carpet covered the floors and all of the furniture in a nauseating combination of neon pink and purple. It was like a unicorn had thrown up all over the place. I wouldn’t wish this décor on my worst enemy.

When we first arrived, Mop tried to explain our ordeal to Chess. He had listened to our plea with all the attention a cat could give, so none at all. This, to my amusement, had aggravated the brownie to no end.

“Don’t act like ye don’t know. Hare said Hatter was here.” He stomped his little foot in the plush carpet, the soft flooring not helping him emphasize his anger.

“How can someone as lovely as you be dressed like such a peasant?” Chess ignored Mop’s little fit. I watched the brownie’s face turn purple with rage. “You should be wrapped in silks and lace. Not...” He picked at my sweatshirt again. “...whatever this is.”

My attention was torn between keeping the cat’s groping hands off me and waiting to see if Mop exploded. He opened his mouth to give Chess what I was sure was a piece of his mind when Chess grabbed my hand and dragged me into his bedroom, leaving a slack-jawed brownie in our wake.

After what seemed like forever, Chess stepped back out of his wardrobe. “Why do you even have so many clothes? Do you get many visitors?”

“One should always look one’s best.” Chess flipped his braid over his shoulder as he handed me a pair of golden leather pants and a matching

sheer top. He arched a perfectly curved brow at me. "Even when no one is around."

I eyed the clothing he held out to me. "I thought warmth was the goal here?"

I picked up the edge of the golden sheer top and rubbed it between my fingers. There was hardly anything to it. It was more of a vest than a shirt with strings that tied in the middle.

Chess gave a devious grin. "Your legs will be warm."

I rolled my eyes at him. "How do I know this isn't a ploy for you to get me undressed?"

His fiendish grin grew darker, and his eyes filled with heat as he wrapped his tail around my waist. His scent drifted to my nose as he brought my body up against his. It was a heady combination of sweet lilac and male musk. Once again my body had a mind of its own, and a low desire began to form in the pit of my stomach.

Damn it. Get a hold of yourself, Katherine!

"If I wanted you out of your clothing I wouldn't need an excuse." Chess' low voice purred against my skin, causing my hairs to stand on end. "Or perhaps you need one to make yourself feel better?"

"No. I, uh—" I coughed, clearing my throat. I put my hands on his shoulders and gave a little push. "You think very highly of yourself, don't you?"

"If I didn't, who else would? Now be a good little girl and put those on." He gave me a little shove toward a door on the other side of the bedroom. "You can use my bathroom. Feel free to shower as well, but I'd hurry it up. I doubt your protectors will let me have you alone for much longer."

Mop had poked his head in the bedroom after he had recovered from being ignored and made a huge fuss about not trusting the cat to be alone with me. He was afraid Chess would find some way to trick me in to doing something I didn't want to do, and he would have none of it.

He had actually said, "Ye yellow-bellied feline better keep ye paws and all the rest of ye off of our human! I won't be havin' the likes of ye taintin' her."

He had said a few other choice insults that would make my grandmother blush, but that was the gist of it. I'd thought he was being silly at the time, but now that I was alone with the cat it wasn't him I didn't trust,

it was me. I didn't think my libido could handle one more spike to it without me ending up a complete slut by the end of it.

"I didn't think you'd have modern amenities." I brushed his ever-caressing tail away and headed to the bathroom, my golden duds in hand. A shower sounded delightful, but I didn't trust the lecherous cat not to come in while I was in such a vulnerable state.

"Why would you think that?" Chess sat down on a violet chaise practically melting into it while his eyes watched my every move.

Ignoring his eyes drilling into my back, I closed the door behind me. I dropped the clothes to the floor and darted for the sink. Splashing my face with water, I swished some around in my mouth, hoping to get rid of the lingering acrid taste from the tea party. God I hoped my breath didn't smell.

"Taking a bath? Want me to come wash your back?" Chess' voice called out from the door, his voice muffled, but no less alluring with the door between us.

"No!" I shouted more than I meant to and dashed back to the door, locking it quickly. I picked up the leather pants, my nose wrinkling before I dropped my shorts to the ground. "You're a cat, right?"

"Of sorts."

"Don't you, you know—" I tried to think of a less sexual word than the one I was thinking as I struggled into the tight pants.

"Don't I what?" I could hear the smile in his voice as if he could see my mental struggle.

I sighed in defeat as I buttoned the pants. I really should stop saying whatever pops into my mind. "Lick yourself?"

A chuckle came from behind the door so close that I spun around to make sure he hadn't entered the room. "Normally I bathe in the bath tub. I do enjoy a good soak."

My eyes wandered to the claw foot tub. It was big enough to fit three people and then some. I loved a good hot bath, but there wasn't enough money in the world to get me in that tub with Chess waiting on the other side of the door. If there was one thing he had done consistently it was try to get into my pants, or rather, me out of them, which he had apparently done. I tied the tie of my overly revealing top and opened the door.

"I could make an exception for...." Chess' voice trailed off as his eyes devoured my appearance.

The pants were snug and low on my hips where the vest floated against my skin. I was glad I had worn my nice matching black underwear tonight instead of my usual worn out white bra. I felt exposed, but the look on Chess' face was enough to make anyone feel like the most desirable person in the world.

After a long moment of Chess' leering, I cleared my throat. "Chess. You're staring."

Snapping his mouth shut, the fanged grin I was coming to anticipate slid back onto his face. He circled me like a vulture. I had to bat away his tail that kept trying to stroke the open skin where the shirt met the top of the pants. Each caress of his tail made me feel more and more vulnerable. He stopped in front of me, glaring down at the tennis shoes I had shoved back on my feet.

I frowned. They did seem a little out of place.

"Hmm. Almost perfect." He tapped a long claw on his chin before smiling. "I have just the thing!"

I eased down onto the chaise; the leather pants made bending pretty impossible. It was my turn to stare as Chess dug through his closet with his butt sticking up in the air. I watched his tail wag back and forth. How did he put his clothes on when there wasn't a hole in the back of his pants? Just when I was starting to think that Chess was drawing out his search so I could stare at his butt, Mop burst into the room.

"Time's up, Cat! Where's Hatter?" He tapped his brown, bare foot on the plush carpet.

Chess popped up out of the closet holding a pair of golden brown knee-high boots in his hands. "Hatter's not here."

"How do you expect me to walk in those?" I stared in disbelief at the four-inch heel.

I'd never worn anything higher than a small wedge. I was short, but I didn't have a complex about it. Flats had always been my shoe of choice.

"Then where?" Mop growled, ignoring my complaints.

"Who knows?" The feline gave a graceful shrug of his shoulders before picking up one of my legs. He slipped one of the boots up my calf, his hands caressing me far more than necessary. I glanced down at him to see his eyes peeking up at me beneath pale lashes as he laced up the corset along the side of the boot, making the act more intimate than it was.

His voice became low and silky, as he whispered, "Certainly not me."

“Then why ye wastin’ our time?” Mop’s angry voice broke the sensual atmosphere Chess was causing, and I jerked away from the smirking feline.

“Trip knows. Oh, oh Trip knows!” The white opalaught jumped up and down, pointing at my new outfit. “Seelie Court!”

“What?” Mop grunted.

“Hatter’s in the Seelie Court, Hatter is!” Trip stood next to me, pulling on the edge of my sheer vest. “See, Lady dressed like a Seelie Fae!”

Mop stopped his grumbling and took in my clothes for the first time. I’d thought Chess was dressing me up for his own pleasure. It never crossed my mind that there could be a more logical reason behind his clothing choices.

“Why didn’t ye say so in the first place?” Mop shook his finger at the feline who was still kneeling at my feet.

“The shadows came and Hatter left.” He examined his nails, showing utter disinterest in Mop’s question.

I glanced between the Fae around me. “Shadows? What shadows?”

“Hatter hides where the shadows won’t dwell.” I frowned at Chess’ sudden flip from persistent flirt to cryptic messenger. “The shadows are the rejected Fae, well some of them. They don’t fit into the Seelie or UnSeelie Court. They live in the Shadow Realm.”

“The nightmare realm,” Trip whispered. His eyes were cautious as if saying the words would bring the shadows down upon him.

Mop never finished explaining about the different worlds. I knew the Underground consisted of three different realms; there was the UnSeelie Court, where we were, the Seelie Court, and now the Shadow Realm. From what I had experienced of this Court, I couldn’t imagine what horrors awaited in the Shadow Realm.

“So, what are they doing here?” I asked, tugging the other boot out of Chess’ hands so I could work on putting it on.

“They want what we have.” Chess slid onto the chaise next to me. His fingers found my blonde strand of hair, which he twisted between his fingers. Whenever his fingertips accidentally touched my shoulder a tinge of heat spread along my skin. I tried to fight my body’s reaction, but it was a lost cause.

“And what’s that?” I swallowed a hard lump in my throat and moved away from Chess’ distracting presence.

“Dreams,” Mop chimed in. “We Fae be relying on the dreams of humans. It be what keeps this place...” He gestured around us. “...alive. The Shadow Realm be cut off from the humans and, in turn, the power they bring.”

“But humans are forbidden here, right?”

Before any of them could answer a shrill cry sounded from somewhere above, causing us all to jump.

“What’s that?”

I sounded like a broken record. Not that I had a choice. With no knowledge of the Fae world, I had to literally rip the answers from my reluctant companions. The whole mysterious world, and its rules, were really starting to piss me off.

I jumped again at the pounding on what sounded like the outside of the willow.

Chess stood up, holding a hand out to me. “Time to go, Lady.”

“The shadows come, they come!” Trip clenched onto my pant leg, his ears dropping to the floor.

“The shadows?” My eyes stared up at the ceiling and my curiosity piqued.

“They probably smelled ye in the woods and followed us here.” Mop turned to Chess. “We need to use yer mirror, Cat.”

Chess ushered us into the closet and closed the door tight behind us. He moved toward the back of the wardrobe, where a full-length mirror with a gilded frame stood. He scratched a claw across the surface of the frame, which activated the symbols that were barely visible to the naked eye. They gave off a faint glow, and then became bright enough that we had to shield our eyes for a moment before they went out completely. In their wake, the surface of the mirror rippled inside the metal.

“In you go.” Chess stepped back from the mirror and gestured us in.

As usual, Mop and Trip didn’t question the liquid portal and hurried through when another loud bang sounded. They seemed to be getting more violent with every minute. Would the tree be able to withstand such abuse?

Before I could step through the rippling glass, Chess grabbed me about the waist and pulled me flush against him. I opened my mouth to protest, even though it was hardly the time for flirting, but my words were swallowed when his mouth met mine. It wasn’t a gentle kiss. It was as if he

were trying to eat me whole. His hands were splayed along my back and arms, and my skin heated from every inch he touched.

His tongue was rough, causing my mouth to tingle as he searched out my own. He drew it into his mouth, sucking on it hard enough for me to jerk back and nick it on one of his sharpened canines. The blood from the wound seemed to spark something in him. A low rumble came from his throat. He pressed a hand to the back of my head to keep me from pulling away as his mouth worked on the wound.

The feeling of his mouth on mine made me lightheaded in the best of ways. In an effort to stay afloat, my hands gripped on to his vest and pulled him closer. I admit I was more than a little disappointed when my movement caused him to pull away.

My chest heaved as I tried to regain my breathing. He leaned his forehead against mine, his own breath coming out in pants. At least, I wasn't the only one affected.

"What was that for?"

A cracking sound broke our little moment, and Chess took a step back. The billowing fog from the forest leaked in under the wardrobe door. All thoughts of Chess' kiss fled my mind as terror began to overwhelm me. I didn't want to know what lie behind that door.

"You need to go now, Kat." He ushered me to the mirror before turning back to the door.

"Wait!" I tugged on his arm. "What about you?"

"Who? Me?" Chess gave a coy smile that didn't reach his heated eyes. "I'm just a cat."

"Are you mad? Come with us!" My voice became desperate as the door banged open. And then there was silence.

The light from the bedroom was gone, and there was only darkness. It was the kind of blackness you were afraid to look into for fear of someone looking back. I knew in the pit of my stomach bad things would happen if that darkness found me.

Chess turned to me once again and brushed his lips against the shell of my ear. My eyes were focused so much on the approaching blackness that I almost didn't hear what he said. I frowned, and my brow furrowed at his words, but before I could question him, he shoved me through the mirror's surface.



Chapter 9

The Looking Glass

“WHY DO YOU taste so old?” Chess’ confusing words echoed through my head as I pounded on the glass of the mirror.

It didn’t surprise me that Chess could tell how old I was based on taste alone. It was obvious that I was becoming desensitized to the strangeness of the Underground. I didn’t even question it. Why wouldn’t he be able to differentiate by taste alone? It only made sense. He was a cat. Well, a cat-Fae, but still.

The part I couldn’t discern was why he said I tasted old? I was only twenty-two, which was not even close to old in human years, let alone Fae years. The majority of the Fae were probably three times my age. Surely he was older than me?

“Yer not gonna get back that way.”

I paused in my assault and scowled at Mop. “We can’t just leave him there.”

“Pfft. The cat will be fine.” The brownie waved me off. “Ye, on the other hand, need to be keepin’ a low profile. That get up won’t fool many Fae. Just keep yer head down and follow me. I know where Hatter be.”

I kicked the frame of the mirror one last time, my eyes full of longing and regret. Chess wasn’t anything like Mop described, or any descriptions of him in the human world for that matter. While there was a certain dangerous charm about him, he was more of a harmless flirt than anything. He certainly didn’t have any of the malicious intent Mop kept implying. And I would rather be back there with him than where we were now.

The moment I’d stepped out of the mirror, I’d wanted to jump back in. The room was dimly lit with black shiny, almost reflective floors. Mirrors lined all the walls. But unlike Chess’ mirror, which reflected my companions and me, these mirrors didn’t reflect anything. Well, not completely. I could see the other mirrors and the floor, but it was as if we didn’t exist.

I hadn’t turned into a vampire, had I? No one had bitten me, that I knew of, and I doubted that small nick from Chess would count. I trailed

my tongue along the edges of my teeth feeling for any sharp edges. No fangs. Heartbeat? A little fast, but still there. I didn't have any overwhelming urges to drink blood, not that I could after the tea party incident.

"What ye doin', ye daft girl?" Mop frowned at me from the exit, which was the one spot in the room not covered in mirrors.

How did he get over there?

"I'm checking to see if I'm a vampire."

"Lady, not dead. Not yet, Lady not." Trip sniffed around me. "Trip can still smell Lady's pretty shampoo, Trip can."

"Uh, thanks, Trip." Awkward. "Why don't I have a reflection then?" I turned this way and that in the mirror, but saw no change.

Mop huffed at having to explain it to me again. He moved back to where I was before the mirrors. "That be 'cos they ain't meant for reflectin'."

"What do you mean? Why are they here if they don't show anything?" I stared into the mirror where my reflection should have been. It was freaking me out to have no reflection.

"I didn't say they didn't. They don't reflect the present." Mop tapped on the glass of one of the mirrors and it rippled beneath his hand.

The mirror cleared to show Mop and Trip arguing at the door in the Between. Though there was no sound, I knew the moment they noticed me coming over to them. Trip's eyes widened and his tail shook as Mop's face closed down and filled with irritation. I stepped closer to get a better look, but before I could see what happened next, Mop removed his hand and the mirror cleared to show the empty room.

"Ye get it?" Mop turned away from the mirror and glanced up at me.

"So, it shows the past? Any past?" I asked more to myself than to the brownie.

I eyed the mirror for a moment as the possibilities turned endlessly in my head. I could see anything. All of the mysteries of the universe were bared before me. Just the thought of what I could do with that information had my hands moving on their own.

My hand stretched out to touch the mirror, I almost touched the surface before Mop's voice piped in, "I wouldn't be doin' that if I be ye."

"Why not?" I frowned down at him. "You did."

“That’s ‘cos I be Fae and know how to use it. Ye human, lest ye forget.” He shook his head. “Besides, this be Fae magic and Seelie at that, ye might not see what ye want. Ye never know how it will react to ye. Best be movin’ along.” Mop and Trip headed for the door once again.

I frowned and dropped my hand to my side, but I didn’t move away from the mirror. So many remarkable findings and always the answer was no.

No, Katherine, you’re a silly human. You’re not allowed. You can’t do that. It’s not proper. Be normal like your sister. Well, I was fed up with proper, and I was fed up with rules.

I put my hand on the cold surface of the glass and then pulled it back. What did I want to see? There was so much I didn’t know, so many questions that still weren’t answered. Chess was a mystery all in his own glorious self, a riddle I was dying to uncover, but there were so many more questions I had that were more important than my traitorous libido. Like, why weren’t humans allowed in the Underground anymore? What happened to the Seelie Princess to cause such a strain between the two courts? And why did every question and answer end up with the dark prince involved in some way?

The surface beneath it began to ripple after that last thought, and my eyes watched the surface in a mixture of fear and curiosity. I hadn’t even been touching it when I thought about the prince, so why was it activating on its own? My thoughts of the UnSeelie Prince must have been enough, because the mirror in front of me disappeared, and in its place was a room.

It was a bedroom to be exact. But it wasn’t my bedroom or any bedroom I’d ever seen before. The bed was moderately sized with a pale, yellow duvet. There was a small table with a set of wooden chairs set to one side. On the table was an unused tea set and a few writing utensils as well as some random everyday items. The room was different from my own back home, which was littered with the laundry from that week and unpacked boxes.

The room was nice enough for me to know it was owned by someone important, but small enough to get to everything within a few feet. While it was neat and tidy, it seemed to lack the feeling of a home – like a stage waiting for its actors to arrive. I placed my hand up to the mirror to get a closer look but instead of feeling the glass beneath my hand it sank through the surface, which caused me to tumble head first into the room.

I landed face first on cushy, golden carpet. The ends of it tickled my nose, making me sneeze. I inched up onto my knees and gazed back toward the mirror. Instead of seeing my face reflecting back at me I saw the room of mirrors. Mop and Trip came back and were silently yelling at me as they beat on the glass.

Apparently this was an invitation-only trip.

I moved back to the glass and held a hesitant hand up to it. The surface rippled and swirled under my hand as it pressed through the fluid glass. At least, I knew I could go back.

Instead of going back the way I came, I moved away from my panicked companions, irritated in Mop's case, and turned back to the room. Where was I?

I fiddled with a few of the perfumes and combs on the vanity next to the mirror, looking for any clue of where I was. Not finding any, I moved over to the table where the tea and writing pad sat. The teapot was cold, and when I lifted the top there was nothing in it. The teacups sat upright as if waiting to be used while the writing pad sat next to one of the place sets. The pad had something written on it.

Picking it up, I squinted at the words that were written in small, tight cursive. This was one of those moments where I wished I had reading glasses. Who could even read this? If the formatting was anything to go by, it was some kind of letter, but all I could make out was flowers and white. The rest was too illegible for me to decipher. I tossed the pad back on the table.

Well, this was boring and uneventful.

I turned from the table and back to the mirror where Trip and Mop waited, but before I could put my hand through the surface, the door opened.

Shit.

"I could only sneak away for a moment," A deep voice rumbled. Footsteps hurried over to me before warm muscular arms wrapped around my shoulders, drawing me back against them.

My body tensed at the contact that came with that voice. I didn't need to have a working mirror to know who entered the room, and I was too terrified of being caught to turn around to face him. My silence and reluctant stance didn't seem to bother the UnSeelie Prince as he continued to caress my shoulders.

“Our mothers are going to be at it for a while. They started talking about troll population control, and you know how that gets them going.” He pushed my hair to the side and rubbed his face into my neck.

Mothers? What was he talking about?

My eyes searched for Mop and Trip in the mirror. They weren’t banging on the glass anymore or yelling at me. In fact, the look of terror on their face solidified how much deep shit I was in.

“Meaning we finally have a few hours to ourselves.” The pounding of my heart thudded in my ears as the prince pressed his front firmly against my back, which showed me how happy he was at that prospect.

Fuck. What was I supposed to do? While part of me was getting a little turned on from the feel of the beautiful prince pressed against my butt, the other part was screaming for me to take my chances and jump back into the mirror.

Apparently, I was quiet too long, because he stopped his nuzzling and turned me around in his arms. “Are you all right?”

The dark-headed prince before me wasn’t the same prince I had met outside of Teeth’s head. I mean, it was the same person, but he seemed younger. Less bitter. The swirling glyphs that decorated the left side of his face were noticeably missing. His hair was unbraided and draped freely past his shoulders, brushing the hard plains of his chest through his blood-red, silk shirt. Long dangling earrings hung from his ears and ruby-colored gems swung back and forth as he moved.

He already caused a profound effect on my insides before, and without the ice blue eyes and the markings, he was the definition of an exotic faerie prince. If that wasn’t bad enough, the heated gaze he was giving me seemed to penetrate out of his gorgeously chiseled face and straight into my girly parts.

Ignoring my traitorous body, my mind tried to fit all the pieces together. The dark eyes, the lack of markings, and the tempting long hair caused something to click inside of me.

This was the past. His past. I was seeing him before he became His Royal Stick Up His Ass. Before his punishment. Before –

“Lynne?”

–She died.

I didn’t know who Lynne was, but if I had to guess, I’d say it was his ex-fiancé. But why did he think I was her? I frowned down at myself,

searching for any indication that I changed into a faerie princess.

Nope. I was still me. Deciding to play along with the scenario, I glanced up at the expectant prince, my voice unsure, "Yes?"

"I asked if you were all right." He tucked a strand of my hair behind my ears, his eyes soft and full of concern.

My heart fluttered a bit, causing me to stutter. "I'm fine. What were you saying about Mother?"

The prince cupped my face in his hand, stroking my cheek as he watched my face for any sign of a lie. When he didn't find anything, he relaxed against me, pulling me closer to him still. I gulped when the side of my face touched his bare chest. The sound of his heartbeat pounded in my ears, its pace as rapid as my own.

"I know you're worried about the disappearances, but you really shouldn't work yourself up so." He pressed his forehead against mine. "You're going to give yourself wrinkles."

"Would you care?" The words came out of my mouth before they ever made it to my mind, but I found part of me really wanted to know.

"What kind of question is that?" He leaned away from me, confusion on his face. "Of course, I wouldn't. You'll always be beautiful to me. I love you, Lynne."

My eyes became as round as a beach ball when his mouth captured mine. I tried not to tense up as he tangled a hand in my hair, deepening the kiss with a sweep of his tongue. I felt like I was betraying Chess in some way by letting him kiss me, but I didn't know what else to do.

His kiss was so different from the aggressive way the feline had taken control of my mouth. Instead of trying to devour me all at once, he seemed to be trying to savor each stroke of his tongue, each press of his lips, and each moan that sounded.

Moan? My eyes snapped open, having closed without my knowledge. This wasn't right. I shouldn't be kissing him. I felt like an intruder. I wasn't his princess, and this was a private moment for him. One I was never meant to see. One I shouldn't even be in.

I tried to pull away from the kiss by taking a step back, but he only followed my movement and even encouraged it until he had me pressed against the vanity. The answer to if he was actually seeing me or someone else was answered when his hand found my skin beneath my sheer top. It stroked along my skin and inched up to cup my breast.

My face heated up as I realized what we must look like to Mop and Trip. I could barely see the mirror out of the corner of my eye, but from what I could see, they weren't there anymore. In fact, the mirror wasn't showing the other room at all. It was reflecting back the bedroom with me pressed up against the vanity, a Fae Prince attached to my face.

I placed my hands onto the prince's chest and pushed, disengaging our mouths. A small part of me pouted at ending the kiss, but it was completely overridden by the panic I felt at being trapped. I struggled against the arms around me; ignoring the confused and hurt look on the prince's face as I put my hands on the mirror.

Solid. The glass was solid. I pounded on the glass; the sound of the prince questioning my actions was drowned out by the whirlwind of thoughts flying through my brain.

Why did the mirror bring me here? What was I supposed to learn from being here? I wanted to know what was going on, but I didn't want to live it, especially since I knew how this story played out. Suicide was so not me. I liked myself far too much to deprive the world of my witty sarcasm and intellect.

"Let me out!" I shoved against the glass, trying to force my way back through, all the while shoving at the hands trying to pull me away from the mirror.

"Lynne? What are you doing? You can't get out that way." The Fae prince tried once again to pull me away from the mirror. Concern etched his face, but I didn't care. I just wanted out.

"Don't touch me!" I shoved against him, my voice becoming hysterical.

At my words, his face shut down. He took a step back, his eyes going dark and frightened. I cringed against the mirror. What now?

"Fine." He whipped around, his earrings swinging in the air as he marched back to the door. "You know where to find me when you figure out what you want."

I winced as the door slammed shut on more than just our conversation. Forgetting the possibility that I could have disrupted their timeline by my little scene, I turned back to the mirror. Pressing my face to the cool glass, my eyes filled with tears of frustration.

I just wanted to go home. Back to my stupid job at the library. Back to my overbearing mother and perfect sister. Hell, I would settle for Brandi at

this point. I would do anything to get out of this place.

Placing my hand on the mirror, I pleaded to whatever Fae magic was at work. "Please let me through. I don't belong here. Please. Please."

I repeated it over and over again, hoping the mirror would give in to my pleas. After a few minutes, when nothing happened, my distress turned to anger. A building rage I didn't know I had pushed at the surface of my skin.

Getting up from my sprawled-out position, I placed both of my hands on the mirror and snarled, "If you don't send me back right now, I'm going to find you in this time and shatter you. You hear me! I will smash you into tiny little pieces and scatter them all over the Underground, so they will never be able to put you back together, and then just for good measure, I'll shatter all of your brothers and sisters too."

The mirror did nothing for a moment, but when I moved backward to make good on my word, the surface rippled and I fell through the mirror. This time landing hands first on the hard black floor with Mop and Trip on either side of me.

"Lady! Lady is back, Lady is." Trip hopped around beside me, making me feel more tired than I already felt.

"Finally." Mop grouched. "Thought I might have to come in after ye." He shook a finger at me as I moved each aching limb into a standing position. "I told ye to leave it alone. I told ye and ye did it anyway. I swear ye have a death wish, ye do."

"Yea, yea. I know. I should have listened. I won't do it again." I rolled my eyes but gave a wary glance back to the mirror and the man I had left in the past.

My lips still tingled where we had kissed. I didn't know how I was going to face him again without thinking about what happened. Would he remember? Did I break something here?

"Don't sass me, girl." Mop glared. He grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the room and into a golden hallway. "While ye were playin' around we found Hatter, so let's get him and get out of here before that damn cat be lookin' for us."

At the mention of Chess, I felt even worse about my little make out session with the prince. "You're wrong, you know." I followed Mop down the corridor. Trip hopped along beside me. "Chess isn't as bad as you made him out to be."

Mop snorted. “A little pheromones and he’s got ye wrapped round his finger.”

“Pheromones?”

“Yeah, some Fae give off a pheromone that bends humans to their will, makin’ them more pliable. I’m not surprised ye didn’t notice.” Mop harrumphed.

That was actually kind of a relief. Not that I could be controlled by some Fae mojo, but that I wasn’t just being slutty, though being controlled wasn’t a pleasant thought either.

“What about the prince? Does he have these pheromones?” I was pretty sure I knew the answer, the pressure that pressed down on me when he had me locked in his gaze had to be some kind of magical influence, but I had to be sure.

“Of course, he does. The stronger ye be the stronger the pheromones are. I’m surprised ye could even put two words together with him, let alone talkin’ back the way ye did.”

We approached a large set of double doors that were darker than the golden walls by only a fraction. Muffled music from the party could be heard from behind them. Who would have a party at this time of day? It was late in the human world, but here? It couldn’t have been more than ten in the morning. Not that I had a watch to go by.

“Anyway, ye need to be watching yer self. Cheshire is a liar. He can’t help himself. He’ll do whatever it takes to get what he wants. Ye be wise to not trust him with ye heart or any other part of ye.” Mop nodded his head at me as if I would naturally agree with him.

He reminded me of my dad when he tried to warn me off boys. Sometimes I wish I’d listened to him and stayed away from the whole lot of them. I’d go on random dating boycotts, but it never lasted. I would see a pretty one and think ‘I bet he could reach that pot on the top shelf!’ It was survival, I swear.

“You’re just pissy because he bested you at cards.” I scowled at Mop.

Mop pulled open one of the large doors and peeked his head in. After a moment, he pulled his head back and growled in a low voice, “It wasn’t just a card game. I lost half me jewels to that game! I would have finally won too if that damn cat hadn’t pulled a flush out of thin air!”

“Is that so?” I smirked, raising my brow at his childish rant.

“Don’t be lookin’ at me like that, ye weren’t there.” The brownie snapped at me, trying to keep his voice down.

“Trip was! Trip was!” The white opalaught waved his paws in the air.

“Well?” I looked to Trip, a smile on my face. “Did Chess cheat?”

“Trip’s not sure. Trip will think, Trip will.” Trip’s tail straightened out severely as he tried to remember.

I watched the opalaught as he scrunched his eyes closed. The fur on his body shook with the effort he was putting into it. My curiosity wasn’t worth his discomfort.

“That’s all right. I’m sure it will come to you. There are more important issues to worry about right now.” I gave Trip an encouraging smile and changed the subject. “So, what’s the plan?” I peeked over Mop to see into the ballroom.

The ballroom was pretty much what I expected. Large columns circled the room holding up the high ceilings. The décor was an array of gold with hints of white here and there to accent it. Even the planters had gilded flowers and leaves. And the guests were no exception to the gold theme.

Beautiful men and women, dressed in various shades of gold and white, circled the room. Some of them danced to a weird floating kind of music while others socialized or ate from the refreshments being passed around. The dais at the top of the room with three golden thrones was the only thing that kept me from thinking it wasn’t some kind of costume party.

On top of two of those thrones sat a man and woman. Neither wore a crown, but they didn’t need one. Their regal presence stated clearing who ruled the room’s occupants. The queen was just as beautiful as the rest of the guests, if not more so, but unlike them, she did not laugh or smile. She simply watched the crowd with cool, calculating eyes.

The White Queen.

Her white dress fit her like a glove, pressing her breasts above the bodice and her small waist. The gown swept over her legs and down to the ground, where it was trimmed with golden lace. Her hair was pulled up into a braided crown and was set with small gems that sparkled in the light. Her face held no makeup, save for the golden-colored paint on her bow-shaped lips. Those lips were set in a stern, straight line, and I could hardly imagine she had ever smiled before.

Wasn’t she supposed to be the nice one? I had expected an overwhelming presence, but the hardness on her face was not what I had

thought the White Queen would be like.

Her king, on the other hand, seemed to be the friendlier of the two. His own pale blonde hair curled at the edges as it swept the top of his matching white shirt. He was the perfect opposite of his mate.

The king craned his head from where he sat to chat with an attractive male who had long silvery hair that was pulled back into a severe knot at the nape of his neck. A tall top hat sat on his head and, unlike the rest of the room, he wore a golden patch-covered suit with a tail coat. He had a small, amused smile on his face as he mumbled to the king. Every once in a while his eyes would cast a wary glance over to the queen.

“There’s Hatter!” Mop pointed at the man on the dais. “Now to get him.”

“You have a plan?” I looked from the Fae to Mop. Were any of the stories of the Wonderland occupants true? This Hatter was far too young to be the one of the classic fairytale.

“Smiling Cat dressed Lady up real nice, Smiling Cat did.” Trip tugged on his ears, looking me up and down.

“What he said.” Mop pointed at Trip with his thumb.

What was their point? I was wearing the same clothes as the Fae in the ballroom, yes, but that didn’t make me look anything like them. Only an idiot would think I belonged. I shook my head at them, backing away from the door.

“No. No way.” I waved my hands in front of me. “I can’t go in there!”

“And why not? Ye look just like them. We’d stick out like a troll doing the samba.” Mop gestured to Trip and himself.

He had a point. Between the three of us, I was the only one who looked the part. Compared to the Fae in the ballroom, I wasn’t a hundred percent sure I would even pass as one of them. If it had been the prince, or even Chess, it would have been all right. They were attractive enough to make the cut, but I wasn’t even pretty enough to be in the running.

“Why do you look so different from the other Fae? They all look like they came out of a fashion catalog while you and Trip are....uh...not.” I couldn’t think of a nice word that wouldn’t offend my companions, but who could compare to such beauty in the other room?

“Just say it.” Mop shot daggers at me. “Ugly.”

“Well, yea.” An awkward frown filled my face as I surveyed the ballroom door. “But it’s like comparing a novel to a book of poetry. A novel

might be a glorious piece of art in whole, but a few lines of poetry can touch you so much deeper and stay with you longer than any novel could.”

“Pretty words for someone who ain’t ever been called ugly.” Mop crossed his arms over his chest.

He was right. I’d never been called ugly before, but it had been implied.

I once had a boy from school take one look at my family picture and then look at me and ask, “What happened to you?” As if I had been slapped with an ugly stick. But I was used to it. I was always being compared to my younger sister in looks and personality.

She was tall and leggy with high cheekbones and fashionable clothes. I had never been into that kind of thing. I’d rather spend my days surrounded by books than all the expensive clothing in the world.

That was probably why I was a librarian and she was soon to be a rich man’s trophy wife. If only people didn’t judge everyone by their cover and got to know them as a person first, then maybe they would know what a raging bitch my sister really was.

“Seelie are High Fae, Seelie are,” Trip offered. I could always count on him to tell me what was what. “Trip is Lower Fae, Trip is.”

“What about Chess and the prince? Are they High Fae? Are your looks the only thing that distinguish what level of Fae you are?” It didn’t seem fair. They couldn’t help what they looked like and to call them lower beings because they weren’t the same was just superficial.

“Of course not! The Seelie Queen may be shallow, but she doesn’t decide who be what. Besides, it ain’t like we want to be livin’ in the Seelie Court anyway.” Mop’s eyes filled with disgust. “Bunch of self-righteous whore mongers. We UnSeelie may not be the most attractive Fae, but least we be honest ‘bout what we are.”

“And what is that?”

“Honest,” he said, and then waved a hand at me. “Don’t worry yerself ‘bout us. Ye need to be gettin’ in there to get Hatter.”

“But won’t they be able to tell I’m human? Chess and Teeth did right away.” I was stalling. I knew I was. I really didn’t want to go in there and pretend to be one of them. Acting was so not in my skill set.

“Ye’ll be fine. They’re far too full of themselves to pay ye any mind. Just grab a glass of whatever they be servin’ and act like ye belong. When

ye get close enough to Hatter just say Hare be waitin' on his tea. He'll understand."

I ground my teeth together. It wasn't that I didn't have faith in Mop, though my faith was in short supply lately – he hadn't let me down so far – but up until this point, I hadn't really been alone. Going in that room and facing all those Fae by myself, I couldn't imagine it going any way but bad.

I glanced down at Mop once more. "What do I do if someone figures it out?"

Mop sniffed the air around me in a curious manner and then nodded his head. "They won't."

I cursed under my breath. What were the chances I would get in and out in one piece? About as likely as my sister stepping into a library – slim to none.



Chapter 10

The Seelie Court

BLENDING IN WASN'T as hard as I thought it would be. I assumed I would be the only one showing so much skin, but I was more clothed than most of the occupants. Male and female Fae danced in various stages of undress. Some of them were wearing what could barely be constituted as underwear while others were fully dressed like me with bits of skin showing. It made blending in a lot easier and me a whole helluvalot less self-conscious.

I grabbed a champagne flute off one of the passing trays and scanned the room around me. There were doors along the walls that led out to balconies, giving a view of the darkening sky. Could it be so late already? I hadn't been there long enough to go through a whole day. Shrugging at another Underground oddity, I turned my attention back to the glass in my hand.

The liquid inside bubbled a dark golden hue. Didn't they know any other colors? I sniffed the top of the glass but jerked back when the contents singed my nose. I took a tentative sip. The drink was sweet and fruity, but it had a bite that caused me to go into a coughing fit.

"Are you all right, dear?" The hand belonging to the concerned voice sat on my arm.

"I—" I coughed and then croaked out, "Yes. I'm fine."

I glanced up at the Fae woman towering over me in stilettos taller than my boots. She had dark brown hair that fell around her shoulders in waves and magenta-colored eyes. Her outfit, if you could call it that, was a golden string bikini that left the majority of her flawless cocoa-colored skin bare. Her chest was the size I always wished I had. Not small enough to be flat chested, but not so large she wouldn't be able to leave the house without a bra. It made her top seem more modest than if I had worn it.

"Not a big drinker, I take it?" The woman's full lips were painted a dark gold and were curved down in a frown as her curious eyes scanned me up and down. Her sultry features made the expression seem more seductive than inquisitive.

“Oh no. I drink all the time. It just went down the wrong pipe.” I coughed once again as I lied.

I hated drinking. A bad night of drinking lost me most of my female friends and had a dozen guys calling me at all hours wanting to ‘hang out.’ I could safely say I didn’t drink much anymore. But she didn’t need to know that.

“Right.” The woman dragged out the word, disbelief on her face. “Well, drinker or not, I’m Magenta. You know, for the account of my eyes.” She splayed a hand across her face, framing her startling magenta-colored eyes. “But you can call me, Mags.”

“I can see that.” I took a tentative drink this time as I was prepared for the burn. “They are very lovely.”

“Aren’t they, though?” Her lips quirked up. She was clearly proud of herself. “And what do they call you?”

“K – Lady.” I caught myself before I gave her my real name, using the alias that I had gained since I had entered the Underground.

“Lady? Why would they call you that?” She looked me over once more before leaning forward and sniffing at the air around me.

I fought the urge to sniff myself just to see what the fuss was about. Did I forget to put deodorant on?

“I don’t know. That’s just what they call me.” I took a big gulp of my drink, looking anywhere except at her.

“Oh! I get it!” She exclaimed clapping her hands together. “I was trying to figure out where I’d smelled your scent before. It’s been awhile since I had my turn. I’d almost forgotten what he smells like.”

“What?” I tilted my head to the side. I didn’t have to lie this time. I had no idea what she was talking about.

“Chess, of course!” Mags giggled looping her arm through mine. She leaned into me like we had a shared secret. “You don’t have to play coy with me, dear. Anybody with half a nose can tell you’re one of Chess’ play things.”

“What?” I asked again, my eyes went wide at the mention of Chess. I searched the room to see if anyone had heard her, but no one was paying us any mind.

“Oh, don’t be so shy, Lady.” She gave me a playful little shove, dropping my arm. “Almost every Fae here has had a turn at being Chess’ flavor of the week.”

“Really?” I frowned, a little perturbed.

My mind flashed back to my kiss with Chess. Had he done that with other women? I was beginning to feel like I wasn’t as special as I thought I was.

“Of course, silly. It’s like a rite of passage. And besides,” she lowered her voice to a whisper, “we have to keep the mediator happy or you-know-who will...” Mags made a cutting motion across her throat.

I nodded like I understood, my teeth grinding against one another. If she called me silly one more time I was going to punch her in the throat. I grabbed another glass from a passing tray as I tried to wrap my head around the new information.

Who was the mediator? Chess? Why did they need to keep him happy?

I searched out Hatter again, planning on returning to the task at hand. I could ask Mop about Chess’ playthings later. Much later.

“It was nice to meet you and everything, Mags, but I really need to—” Before I could excuse myself to find Hatter, Mags started waving her arms in the air like a crazy person, yelling into the crowd.

“Jewels! Gab! Over here!” She motioned a male and female couple over. “Come meet Chess’ new playmate!”

As the two approached, a sinking feeling began to grow in my stomach. I had never been one for attention and Mags’ outburst had caused more curious eyes to focus on me. If I wasn’t careful this chatterbox was going to blow my whole plan.

“Well now, aren’t you delicious?” The male wrapped a strand of my copper hair around his fingers, his jewel-encrusted nipple rings flashed in the light. This must be Jewels. They sure were a creative lot in the Underground.

Unfortunately, the nipple rings weren’t the main attraction of the male Fae invading my personal space. My eyes darted down to the thick muscular thighs surrounding the golden speedo barely covering his special parts. My face flushed when he angled it my way, pretending to bump against me.

“Hands off.” Gab smacked his hand away and gave me an appraising glance. “You know she belongs to Chess right now.”

Jewels pouted, his long blonde hair fell over his eyes. The two must have been twins. They both had the same shade of long pale blonde hair that reached their waist, and their eyes were the exact same shade of

cerulean blue. But while Jewels was hard and muscular, Gab was soft and feminine.

She had large breasts and a curvy figure, and while Mags wore less clothing than the female twin, Gab's clothing was far more obscene. Her voluptuous figure was incased in a skin-tight, *sheer* golden dress that skimmed her mid-thigh. While I had opted to wear a bra under my sheer top, Gab had no inclination. When my eyes scanned her completely, and I realized she had also decided to go commando, I took a large burning drink of my glass and hurried to grab another one as the tray passed by.

"So..." Gab's eyed Mags and then turned back to me.

"Lady." Mags provided, not at all bothered by the other woman's public nudity. Their bar for inappropriate had to be very, very low.

"Lady?" The blonde female's brows crinkled. "I don't believe we have met before. I thought I knew everyone who is anyone in the Seelie Court, especially one of Chess'."

She flipped her long shimmering hair over her shoulder, skimming a hand down her figure and smirked. "Our cat is very fond of me. And he's usually more particular about his playmates." She picked up a piece of my hair with a grimace before dropping it and giving me a condescending smile. "Usually."

Great. Meaning I didn't fit the bill. What was her problem? Based on her need to downgrade someone she had just met, I'd have said she was threatened by me. Not that I could compete with them on any level. I didn't even have the energy to try. Was it just me, or was the room getting a little warm?

"Jewels and I were with Chess just last month if you want any tips." Mags frowned at Gab's jab as I almost choked on my drink.

"Are you all right, love?" Jewels patted me on the back, pressing himself against my side as I coughed the burning liquid back up.

Waving him off, I swallowed. "I'm fine." He moved his hand to my lower back and pulled me close to his side. I glanced between the twins. "Together? You mean, like at the same time?"

The blondes nodded, an identical smirk splaying across their faces at my reaction, Gab's more delighted than her brother's. I wasn't naïve. I knew people had ménage à trioses, but I had never met anyone that was in one, let alone siblings. It made me think less of Chess in some way.

“Chess has quite an appetite.” Jewels drew out the words to match the rhythm of his fingers that were stroking my waist.

“He’s very talented with his hands and his...” Gab paused for emphasis. “...tail.” She smirked, delighting in making me uncomfortable. “For a half-breed that is, but you would know that as his lover, wouldn’t you?”

I didn’t like the way she asked that. I didn’t like any of it to be honest. My stomach rolled at the thought of Chess with any of them. So much for thinking I was special. I was just one of many. He was probably laughing at me right now.

“You know, it’s awfully warm in here.” Jewels fanned himself with a hand before turning his heated gaze to me. “Maybe you’d like to get some air with me.”

As he said the words, my face became warmer, and I felt myself wanting to go with him. I didn’t know if it was all the alcohol or if it was my insecurity about Chess. Maybe Jewels was working some pheromone mojo on me, and I barely heard myself say, “Okay” before I let him usher me toward the balcony.

“Lady!” Gab and Mags gaped at me.

“You can’t.” Mags pulled me away from Jewels. “You’re Chess’ until your time is up.”

“That means you can’t get involved with other Fae.” Gab shook her head, frowning at her brother. “Honestly, did you forget the rule?” She lifted a brow at me. “When is your time up?”

“Yes, when?” Jewels eyes flashed in anticipation.

Instead of answering their question, I chugged the rest of the drink in my hand. I could hardly feel the burn of it as it went down. They were tasty once you had a few. I could drink them all night.

As I stared down into my empty glass, a dark shadow fell over me. A warm hand slid around my waist, pulling me close. I knew it was the prince before I turned my head up to see his pale blue eyes gazing down at me. His presence wasn’t one to be forgotten quickly, even as fluid as I felt.

The circling vultures turned their attention from me to the royal, bowing in unison. “Your highness.”

“Come now.” He waved a pale hand at them to get up. “This is a party. There is no need to be so formal.”

“What are you doing here?” I blurted out without thinking. The feel of his warm chest on my back caused tingles in my stomach that had nothing to do with the alcohol I had downed.

“Lady!” Gab gasped. “You can’t speak to his highness that way. He may be UnSeelie...” she glanced up at the prince. “Pardon me, your highness.” Then glared at me. “But he is still royalty.”

“Of course.” His understanding voice didn’t match his hard eyes and the grip that tightened at my waist. The swirls that decorated the side of his face glowed briefly before his demeanor became playful.

“Please excuse Lady. She does not hold faerie wine well.” He plucked the empty glass from my hand and shoved it into Jewels’ hands. The blonde male pouted at the possessive hold the prince had on my waist. Not that I was particularly upset with the fact, but I was happy for an excuse to be away from the leering twin. The prince was right on time for once, and I found myself wondering what was in it for him.

A sense of relief passed over the group at my apparent inebriation. They were quick to accept my lack of knowledge was due to my drunken state and moved on to reminisce about their time with Chess. I opened my mouth to protest my ability to drink just as well as the rest when a large hand covered my mouth.

“I better get this spit fire some air before....” he trailed off as they all nodded in unspoken understanding.

Before what? Before I embarrassed him more? Before I made a fool of myself? Or before I lost my head to their ice bitch queen?

I let him usher me away from the group, my eyes taking in his clothes in an effort to keep the room from spinning. I was happy to find he was completely clothed, but a little out of place compared to the others. His previous dark clothing was gone, and in their place was a blood red poet shirt that had billowing long sleeves and opened at the neck. It was as sheer as my own, allowing me to finally confirm that the symbols did indeed run down his chest and into the top of the dark brown pants tucked into his knee-high boots.

“Hey, you don’t match!” I laughed aloud at the discovery. Not a cute laugh, but a barking ‘HA’ that even in my inebriated state made me wince.

“Would you be quiet?” His voice was harsh in my ear as he led me to a balcony near the dais. His markings pulsed in an angry beat before

leaving him with a teasing smirk on his face. “What could a silly thing like you be doing here?”

“What am I doing here?” What was I doing here? Wasn’t I supposed to be looking for someone? I could really do with another one of those fruity drinks.

“What are you doing here?” I pointed a finger into his chest, falling over at the effort. “Oops.” I giggled.

“I was invited. You, on the other hand, were not.” The prince held onto my arms dragging me out the balcony doors.

My head was spinning so much I didn’t know what was what. All I could think about was how good the prince smelled and how warm his arms were. I wondered what shampoo he used. Giggling at my own thoughts, I didn’t know he had asked me a question until his fingers tightened on my arm.

“Ow! What was that for?” The pain helped clear my head as anger set in.

“Did you hear a word I said?” He growled, his eyes flashing dark blue.

I stared up at those ever-changing eyes. Those dark blue eyes reminded me of my time in the past. The way he had pressed against me as we kissed. My face heated at the thought. Did he remember that? Of course he did, but not with me. He thought I was that Lynne person. Had my trip there caused any damage to his timeline? There were too many unanswered questions, and they were making my head foggy again.

“Um, no.” My eyes struggled to focus on his lips as they moved again.

“Do you know what will happen if someone finds out what you are?” His lips pressed together in a tight line.

My brow furrowed as I tried to think of what could happen, but all I could come up with was how thin his lips were. They were pressed together so tight they were almost nonexistent.

He gave a rough sigh when I didn’t answer. “How did you even get in the Seelie Court in the first place?”

That answer I knew.

“Chess!” My voice echoed out into the darkness beyond the edge of the balcony. My voice shouldn’t have echoed like that. I had the urge to yell out again to be sure it had, but I was more afraid someone would answer back than I was tempted.

For some reason my declaration caused the prince to pull me close and bury his face in my hair. My body tensed as his nose trailed along my skin. Inhaling deep, he cursed and shoved me away from him.

“Why does everyone keep sniffing me? Do I smell that bad?” My laugh caught in my throat as he brought his face close to mine again.

The blue of his eyes was so light they were almost translucent. He sniffed around my mouth. His eyes seemed to cloud over as the markings on his face gave an angry flash.

“You smell like that damn cat!” The dark prince growled deep in his throat. “I told you to stay away from him.”

“You also said no Seelie Court,” I reminded him, giving a girly giggle much to my horror.

“Obviously that was disobeyed as well, because here you are.” He stared at me as if trying to see inside my brain. “Do you have a habit of causing trouble in your world as well, or is it just here?”

“Oh no, I’m chock full of trouble. Enough to go around.” I swung my arms wide to emphasize but stumbled when I became dizzy.

“Well, it is no wonder his harem thought you were one of them.” The jovial tone in his voice barely covered up the fury hiding in his eyes. The glyphs may have been able to change how the prince acted, but it couldn’t stifle all of his personality. “What were you doing with that naughty cat to make you smell so?”

“What do you care?” Baffled by his sudden interest, I gripped his forearms in an effort to stay upright. All of the wine had caught up with me in a bad way. My whole world was spinning out of control, and the only way out was down. “Oh God, I’m going to be sick.”

“Oh dear, oh dear.” His dark hair fell over his face as he shook his head. “How much faerie wine did you drink?”

“Uh...” How much did I drink? At least two. Maybe three? I didn’t drink often, but it shouldn’t make me this drunk. “I don’t know.” I took deep breaths as I tried not to vomit all over the golden floor. “I lost count.”

“Dammit, Kat.” He rubbed a hand over his face and pulled me deeper onto the balcony.

“Not so fast.” My feet stumbled as I tried to keep up with him.

My eyes widened as his large hands grasped my face between them, his lips hovered over mine. Was he going to kiss me? It would be my

second kiss from him in less than an hour. My mother would have been so proud.

I fought the snorting laugh that threatened to spill out of my mouth as I let my eyes flutter close. I'm not the kind of girl, who would get involved with more than one guy, but the sting of finding out that Chess had a harem was still fresh and my befuddled mind only wanted to soothe it.

I waited for his lips to descend onto mine, but they never did. I peeked my eyes open when his thumb pressed down on my chin to open my mouth. Barely a sliver of space existed between our lips as he inhaled. When I exhaled, a glittery blue substance floated out of my mouth and into his.

What the hell?

The fog in my head lightened. The more substance he pulled out of me, the clearer my head became, and thankfully, my stomach settled with it as if I had never drank any of the faerie wine to begin with.

"What did you do?" I was grateful to be my sober self again but cautious as to why he was helping me. Mop had warned me about receiving help without expecting to pay for it later. The prince was the kind of Fae I really didn't want to owe.

"You, my dear Kat." His voice had gone soft, and his hand was still on my face as his thumb stroked my bottom lip. "Are human. Faerie wine is full of magic, which makes it far too strong for your little human body to handle. I simply took the magic away." He eyed me for a moment. "It is actually surprising you did not pass out after the first glass. Tell me, do you drink so heavily in your world?"

"Of course not!" I flinched as my voice came out louder than I meant. I glanced down at my feet, feeling foolish. "I got nervous. They were asking too many questions. Then they started talking about how everyone does it with Chess at one point or another and, I don't know." I shrugged. "It freaked me out."

"Why?" The prince chuckled. "Did you think you were special?"

"Well, no. I just thought--"

"What? The cat kissed you because he wanted you? Maybe even liked you?" I didn't like his condescending tone. He spoke to me as if I were a child that was thinking silly thoughts.

"I don't know, maybe." I wrapped my arms around myself to ward off his questions. I had thought I was special. That Chess had found something in me that he desired. Was that so wrong?

“Why else would he kiss me or stay behind to face the shadows while I got away if he didn’t care for me?” I winced. I sounded desperate.

“Poor. Sweet. Kat.” He punctuated each word while his hand trailed down the length of my hair, stopping to twirl a strand between his fingers.

What was with the touching?

“He only kissed you to cover up your stench. Your human odor would have given you away the moment you stepped into the ballroom.” He brought the strand up to his nose, gazing up at me beneath long, thick lashes as he inhaled my scent.

It made sense, but it made my chest hurt. That was why Mop had sniffed the air before I entered the ballroom. Why Mags had decided I was one of Chess’ play things after smelling me. Mop was right. Chess did always have another plan, even if that plan was to help me. But would I have to pay in return? I hoped not.

“Even if it’s true, he didn’t have to stay behind to let me get away.” I jerked my hair from his grasp.

“Shadows don’t care about him. He’s nothing but a half-breed. Besides,” he moved toward the balcony doors, “Chess can pass between worlds without a mirror.”

“How’s that possible?”

“He’s a half-breed.” He gave an impatient sigh when I frowned. “He is half-Seelie and half-UnSeelie. He does not belong to either court.” His eyes watched the crowd as he talked, his shoulders tight as if he’d rather be anywhere but there. “He is not bound by the same rules.”

“Is that why he has a full name and you don’t?” I had wondered, but I hadn’t had a chance to ask with all that was going on. Now that someone was offering up information, I wasn’t going to waste the chance.

“I have a name.” The glyphs flashed his irritation. “And it is quite rude to ask for a Fae’s name. Only someone the Fae trusts completely would know it – like a parent or a spouse.”

“But you know my name.” I knew it was a stupid statement as soon as I said it. Of course he knew my name. I’d all but shouted it since I arrived.

“That is because you give it out too freely. Though, I have wished for the shadows to take you, it does not seem to have any affect. Another curiosity I have yet to figure out.” His lips turned down into a tight frown, and I followed his eyes to where Gab was whispering to the White Queen.

When the ice beauty locked her gaze on us, the prince turned to me, his hand outstretched. “Dance with me.”



Chapter 11

Dancing & Queens

IT WAS MORE a command than a question. Usually I would have responded with a snarky remark or even a question, but I could feel the push of his Fae mojo pressing down on me. It wasn't as strong as it had been when I'd first met him. I didn't have the urge to throw myself at his feet and beg for mercy, but I couldn't stop it when the "Why?" on my lips morphed into a breathy, "Okay."

My hand slid into his, and before I knew it, I was on the dance floor with his arms wrapped around me. The press of his pheromones lessened and my anger flared to life, overpowering any nervousness I would have felt from dancing in public. Smart ass I was; dancer I was not.

"That's cheating. You could have asked." I fixed him with a scorching glare as the room spun around us. The many faces of the golden Fae blurred into one as he led me around the room. I focused my eyes on his left shoulder so I wouldn't become dizzy from the spinning.

"Would you have said yes?" He pressed me closer, his breath hot on my face.

"Well, no. Probably not, but it's still polite to ask." The anger in my voice lessened as I tried to ignore the feel of his body pressed against mine.

It was a formidable task. I'd have focused on making sure I didn't trip over my own feet, but since he was an accomplished dancer I couldn't use that as a distraction. Any other time I would have marveled at the feat, but I was neck deep in Seelie Fae and the only Fae I could worry about was the one before me making me feel weird emotions that were more terrifying than anything else in the room.

"I thought you weren't supposed to take things without permission? We didn't make a deal." I grumbled into his shoulder, trying to hide the way my heart pounded against my ribs.

The pressure of his magic slid across my skin as the dark-haired prince shifted his stance so he could look at me. The intensity in his gaze caused me to swallow hard. "For once in your mortal life, do not think, feel."

Oh, I felt it all right. It sizzled down my spine, along my heated skin, and settled deep in my stomach where it curled up and purred like a cat in a warm sunspot.

The music changed from a happy upbeat tone to a dark and sensual beat. It caused a tickling sensation that left me feeling both alive and breathless. The press of the prince's large hands against my waist and hand didn't help my ability to think straight, nor the zing I felt each time our bodies brushed against each other. I chanced a glance up to his face and smiled a little as his eyes flickered between light and dark. At least I wasn't the only one affected.

As he weaved us between the other dancers, I glanced away from his overbearing gaze to watch those around us. Some of them were too lost in each other to pay us any mind, but others openly stared at the redheaded girl dancing with the UnSeelie Prince. Their faces were full of curiosity and – hostility? The hostility wasn't directed at me, though. The disdainful glances and thinly veiled sneers were all for the dark prince holding me.

“Why are they looking at you that way?” I gripped his shoulder as if I could protect him from their animosity.

“Such concern for me now? How generous of you.” The chuckle reverberated from his chest and into mine causing my face to heat.

I didn't care about him. Not really. It was just for curiosities sake and maybe for the fact that he was the only thing standing between me and a horde of Seelie Fae. If I kept telling myself that maybe it would be true.

“Is it because of Lynne?” I tried to take the focus off me but regretted the words when his entire form stiffened, stopping our promenade as he ripped himself away from me. Thankfully, his abruptness didn't seem to disrupt the other dancers. They simply stepped around us as if we weren't standing in the middle of a dance floor staring at each other.

“Where did you hear that name?” His eyes were full of an angry dark blue, his real eyes peeking through as the glyphs flared to life.

I realized my mistake as I stuttered for an answer, “Oh, you know. Around.”

“You are lying.” The prince grabbed my wrist in a pinching grasp. The teasing was gone from his face. Rage and suspicion poured out of him as his pheromones beat down on me, commanding me to tell him the truth.

“I'm not lying.” I gritted my teeth against the urge to tell him where I'd really heard the name. I didn't think he would be too happy to know I

was poking around in his past any more than he would be to know that I was the one he was kissing at that time.

“You are!” He growled, causing the dancers closest to us to pause in their dance. Seeing he was drawing attention to us, he pulled me back in his arms, keeping a tight but distant grip on me.

“I am not.” I hissed at him, choosing to match his anger with my own, instead of giving in to the fearful pulse beating down on me.

He pulled me close as if to whisper naughty thoughts in my ear. “The only ones who know that name are the Seelie Queen, King, and myself. All other memories of it have been eradicated.” His hand on my waist tightened further, bruising the skin beneath my sheer top. “So, either we missed someone, or you are not who you say you are.”

I opened my mouth to protest but he cut me off, “And before you lie to me again. Know Fae do *not* make mistakes.”

Eyes on anything but him I muttered, “I don’t know what you are talking about. How can I be something that I’m not?”

“I do not know, but believe me when I say, I will find out.” He grabbed my chin and forced my face to look at him. “You had best remember who you should be trusting here.”

“And I can trust you?” I scoffed at the suggestion. I trusted him as much as I trusted that the tightness of his pants was causing some kind of neurological damage to his brain.

“Girl, here I am the only one you can trust. Their smiles are lies, and they will not hesitate to devour you in an instant.” His voice lowered as the music stopped and the crowd around us opened up to reveal the Seelie Queen and Chess’ harem.

Mags seemed uncomfortable to be there. Jewels wasted no time pinning me with a hungry leer, licking his chops like a wolf ready to eat his meal. Gab, on the other hand was the one I was most worried about. Her face was the definition of triumph. Nothing good would come from this interaction.

The dark prince didn’t even bat an eye at them as he put a charming grin on his face. “Ah, your majesty, how can I be of service?”

“My darling Gab says that this is the half-breed’s new playmate this moon.” Her cool eyes washed over me, chilling me to the bone. “I swore she must have been mistaken because this is the mourning moon. If you do

recall?” Her cold eyes locked with the prince’s, causing him to tense up beside me.

“Of course, your majesty. How could I forget?” His voice held all the formality required of him, but his body gave away the building anger inside.

“Well, you do have issues with remembering items of importance.” Her mouth curled into a cruel smile. “I believe that is the reason behind this celebration to begin with, is it not?”

“Yes, your majesty.” I watched as his jaw clenched and the glyphs pulsed softly as if he was trying to control his rage.

“Now, now.” The Queen patted the cheek with the glyphs. “Don’t be cross.” Her laugh stung like razor blades against my skin. “Not that you have a choice.”

I gulped when she turned that cruel smile to me. I knew from the moment I saw her that I didn’t want to be on her bad side. Too bad that didn’t stick. I forced myself not to take a step back as her towering height loomed over me.

She bent at the waist so we were eye to eye. “Do you know what the mourning moon means, sweetness?”

“Uh...” My mouth became dry. “That we’re in mourning?”

“Exactly!” She clapped her hands together pleased with my answer. “So tell me, why did you say you were the half-breed’s toy this moon if this is the only moon in which he does not get a tribute?”

“But I didn’t—” I blurted out. “I mean...that is to say.” I pointed at the harem waiting eagerly at her back. “They assumed I was. I just didn’t correct them.”

“Oh?” Her eyes lit up. “And why is that, my dear?” She placed a long finger under my chin. “Could it be that you have something else to hide? Why would you smell like the half-breed, if not to disobey the rules?”

My eyes darted between the members of the group. Mags watched me with pity in her eyes. Gab was simply beaming at my lack of an explanation, reminding me why I didn’t have girlfriends. Too many jealous bitches. I avoided the hungry gaze of Jewels and searched the crowd for something to inspire me.

Why did everyone think I was lying? Of course, I was up to something. I was trying to get home without being eaten, or worse date

raped by Fae magic. My mouth opened and closed as I floundered for something, anything to satisfy the Seelie Queen.

“It was me.”

All eyes jerked to the prince beside me. While I was relieved the attention was off me, I couldn’t believe he would put himself in the line of fire for me. After the way Mop and Trip had described his sense of justice, he wasn’t likely to be the one to take the fall, especially not for a human.

“What was you?” The Queen’s words seemed more like a warning than a question.

“She was with me. Not the half-breed.” His face formed a playful grin. “It has been a while, and the outskirts do get boring after a while. Am I not allowed my own play thing?” He slid an arm around my waist, his hand lying dangerously close to my butt. I didn’t have a chance to react to his touch before the queen gave a vengeful cry.

“No you are not. Or did you forget that too?” She turned and addressed the watching crowd. “My children, hear me and be witness. The UnSeelie Prince has once again caused offense to our court. Not only for his previous transgression, but to seek pleasure in the arms of one that is not his betrothed and on the anniversary of her demise.”

The Queen’s words stung my ears as the crowd gasped and shouted. The glittering room that was so full of merriment just moments ago was now full of anger and malice. My mind spun with questions.

The celebration was for the mourning of the prince’s ex-betrothed, which apparently meant he was tied to her until death? What was he thinking? How was announcing me as his lover a good idea? I would have laughed at the complete disaster I was in if I wasn’t so terrified of what the Queen was going to do next.

The prince stepped away from me and toward the Seelie Queen. “What could you do that you haven’t done already? I am exiled from my own home. I am a slave to the courts and forced to be happy about it.” The dark prince’s rage pressed down on the room as he fought against the symbols influencing him.

“I have had to attend this gathering every year for decades.” His voice filled with pain, the light coming from his face blinded the room from the force of his rage. “I lost her too, and I’m not even allowed to mourn her. So tell me, your majesty.” He spit the words like venom. “What else could you possibly do?”

“Do?” The queen’s voice was bitter and filled with sadness. Perhaps she cared more for the prince’s pain than she let on. Then she seemed to remember herself as her eyes became hard again and found me once more. “I’m not going to do anything to you. Your companion, on the other hand, will get the same fate as the last one.” She snapped her fingers in the air. “Guards! Seize her.”

Two large gold-plated guards grabbed me by the arms before I could wonder where they’d come from. I pushed against their tight grip, my heart pounding in my chest. The manic look in the queen’s eyes was all I needed to know of my fate even as her words sliced into my skin.

“Off with her head!”



Chapter 12

Both Ways

MY MOTHER WOULD be horrified to see me in jail. A Fae jail, more of a dungeon really, but jail all the same. She wouldn't even question whether or not I was guilty, only that I was making her look bad. I could imagine exactly how that conversation would go.

"Katherine Marie, what am I supposed to say to the neighbors? How am I going to show my face on Sunday morning with all of them knowing I have a criminal for a daughter?" Her voice would start to have that screechy pitch to it whenever there was a threat to her public face.

"Who said you had to tell them?" I shot daggers at the floor of the cell, the cold stone biting into my hands where I sat.

"They're my friends. How can I not tell them?"

"Ha! Some friends." I snorted, rolling my eyes because she wasn't there to chastise me for it.

"You would understand if you'd leave the house more than to just go to work. Then maybe you would have more friends. Maybe that Ziegler girl? She seems nice."

"You only want me to go out with her brother." I wasn't naïve enough not to see through her schemes; years of experience had hardened me to that truth.

"So what? He's a good looking boy and a lawyer too!"

I scoffed. "You mean a bully."

There were only three items on my mother's checklist to make a good husband: a good job, good looks, and no scandals. The majority of the time I didn't know if I was talking to her or some character out of a Jane Austen novel. She was a poster girl for the 19th century. Not that she would know what that was.

"Now, Katherine, you don't know that."

"I do to. I...why am I even arguing with you, you aren't even here!" I jerked back, banging my head on the wall behind me. I closed my eyes and rubbed the sore spot. "No wonder everyone is crazy here. Much longer and I might not know where home is anymore."

“Talking to yourself, dear Kat?”

“Chess?” My eyes popped open at the sound of his voice.

There, peering through the bars of the cell door with an amused grin; was the delectable Cheshire S. Cat. I jumped up and raced over to the door. I was still mad at him, but it was a relief to see a friendly face.

“Hello, my lovely.” He rolled his face against the edge of the window, looking very much like a real cat in that moment.

“What are you doing here?” I stood on my tiptoes to meet his gaze.

His head tilted sideways at my question. “To rescue you, of course.”

Suspicion filled my eyes. I stepped back from the door and crossed my arms. “Why should I trust you? I’m only in here because of you.”

“Now, is that any way to talk to your savior?” Chess moved out of sight, leaving me to stare at the door across the hall.

When he didn’t poke his head back up after a moment, panic overcame me. “Chess?”

I grabbed the edge of the window and tried to peer out into the corridor. Did he leave me? I should have kept my complaints to myself. I turned back to my little cell, about to have a fit, when I saw Chess there lounging on the cell’s little cot.

“Wha—? How?” I pointed between the door and the smug cat peering up at me.

“Besides, it’s not my fault you got distracted,” Chess continued as if he hadn’t just appeared out of nowhere.

“How did you do that?”

Chess shrugged his bare shoulders. His previous ensemble had been switched out to a more golden variety, which of course, made him look even more delectable than before.

His pale pink hair hung loose over his shoulders, framing his shirtless chest. His array of belts was still wrapped around his waist, but his dark pants and boots had been replaced with ones almost identical to mine. Braided ropes wrapped around his bicep, tight enough to make his muscles bulge over them, that or his arms were more impressive than I had previously thought. I must have been staring for longer than I thought, because a growl rolled out from deep in his throat.

“What do you mean distracted?” I forced my eyes up to his and tried not to blush at the heat in his gaze.

“If you’d gone straight to Hatter like you were supposed to, you wouldn’t have drawn any attention to yourself. I wouldn’t have given you my scent if I had known you were going to blow it.” His leering dimmed a bit at my failure.

“Fat lot of good it did me. Your play things sniffed me out.” My eyes kept straying to his chest and the faint scars there. My fingers itched to touch them. To ask him how he had gotten them.

I glanced at Chess’ face. His lips curled into a smile, the tips of his fangs peeked out over his lip. He knew exactly what affect he had on me. Gab’s face popped into my head, reminding me I wasn’t the only one who had his attention.

I balled my hands into fists and turned my face to the wall. Touching would be bad. No need to give him more ammunition to take advantage of me.

“Ah! You’re jealous.” Chess’ excitement was abundant. I watched from the corner of my eye as he stalked his way over to me.

“I am not.” I stared hard at the wall. “I just don’t like being mistaken for one of your prostitutes.” I tried not to shiver as his tail wrapped around my waist. The feel of it should have freaked me out, but I was slowly starting to expect it and even hoped for it a little bit.

“They are hardly prostitutes.” His voice caressed my ear. “They come from noble families.”

“High-end prostitutes, then.” My heart jumped into my throat when his lips whispered down the curve of my jaw.

I let out a shaky breath as his clawed hands turned me to look at him. The feral glint in his eyes made me take a step back. And then another. The Fae mimicked each step I made until I found myself bumping against the hard stone of the cell.

“The guards will be here to check on you soon.” His lips hovered over mine. “Wouldn’t you – in your last moments – like to find out what all the fuss is about?”

“Um.” My tongue felt heavy and clumsy in my mouth as I fought for an answer.

It was tempting. If our kiss was any indication of what it would be like with him – deep, wild and all consuming – I had no doubt that his lovemaking would be the same.

Though, I had never been a casual kind of girl, I had a feeling Chess only ever did casual. If that wasn't enough to deter me from accepting his offer, icy blue eyes attached to a dark head of hair popped into my mind. Those eyes were like a dose of cold water to my libido.

I turned my head so his lips brushed my cheek instead of completing the kiss. He pushed back from the wall, confusion and maybe a hint of hurt etched on his face. I almost apologized, but he recovered quickly, giving me his usual cheeky grin. Guess he wasn't that hurt after all.

"Enough dallying, let's get you out of here." He moved toward the door, his tail swishing behind him.

I stayed where I was against the cell wall and watched him approach the door. My eyes widened as Chess poked his head through the door. It reminded me of what the dark prince had said earlier about Chess not being bound by the same laws.

"What do you mediate exactly?"

"The worlds, of course." The green-eyed feline pulled himself back into the cell. Reaching down, he pulled a metal clip from his boot. "I'm what you'd call neutral." He popped his upper half back through the door.

"If you can pop through walls why do you need to pick the lock? Can't you just, I don't know, pop me through too?" I tried not to let my eyes focus on the swaying of his behind as he worked on the lock.

"It doesn't work that way, Kitty Kat." His tail's movements became more exaggerated as if he knew I was watching. "You belong to the human world. While I—" The lock clicked and Chess opened the door with a mischievous grin. "—can go any way I please."

"I just bet you do," I muttered as the thought of him and Jewels jumped into my head. "Don't you live in the UnSeelie Court, though? That's not very neutral."

"The willow is actually an extension of the Between. It doesn't exist in either court." He gestured for me to go to the right. "And only I can let anyone in or out."

Chess led me down the dimly lit corridor, passing several doors that were full of moans and groans. It was hard to tell if it was from pain or pleasure. For all I knew it could have been both. One room emitted a little squeak that was enough like Trip's to make me worry.

"Did you find Trip and Mop? Did they get captured too?" I grabbed Chess' shoulder; his skin was warm beneath my hand. "We have to save

them.”

“Don’t worry that fiery little head of yours. They are safe and sound in my humble abode and awaiting your return. You, on the other hand, have a Hatter to get to.” Chess’ tail pushed me along the corridor.

“Won’t the queen find out you were helping me?” I shoved a hand at the fur stroking my lower back. My refusal before apparently hadn’t dissuaded him from trying his luck again.

Chess wrapped his tail back around his waist, and for the first time, his face showed irritation. “She will if you keep dawdling, Katherine.”

“Hey! How do you know my full name?” I pointed an accusatory finger at him.

“I know quite a many things.” He paused as we approached a split in the corridor. “Not all of them pleasant. Though, if you didn’t want anyone to know, you shouldn’t talk to yourself like no one is listening.” His eyes searched around the corridor. “Someone is always listening. Now, if you are finished wasting time, I can hear the guards moving around above.” His ears twitched on his head as if listening to some noise I couldn’t hear. “More than likely getting ready to remove that pretty little head of yours.”

He turned down the right corridor with a little less swagger in his step. I supposed he couldn’t be cheerful all the time. I wasn’t in much of a cheerful mood myself. I was in a world I didn’t know with people who could turn on me at any moment. No one at home knew where I was, and I doubted they’d be able to find me even if they knew I was missing.

Nothing was like I had read about. Even the White Queen was all backward. I thought taking people’s heads for small offenses was only something the Red Queen would have done. Though, to her, I supposed it wasn’t such a small offense. Not that I wasn’t sympathetic to her loss, but I liked my head right where it was, and the thought of losing it didn’t sit well with me.

I took a few big steps to catch up with him but stopped again when a small voice called out.

“Hello? Is anyone there?”

There weren’t any doors down this way so it couldn’t have been a prisoner. But both sides of the corridor were lined with curtain-covered frames. The majority of the curtains were brown and frayed, but some of them were vibrant red and blue. Did the different colors mean something or did they just run out of brown ones? I gave a curious glance at each of

them, but I kept my distance in case something unwarranted jumped out at me.

I waited a few moments, straining my ears to find where the voice had come from. I almost walked to where Chess was waiting, tapping his foot with impatience when the voice called out again.

“Hello?” The voice came from behind one of the red-covered frames next to me.

I stepped up to the frame, observing the cloth covering it. The blood red cloth was thick enough to provide adequate coverage but thin enough that the embellishments on the frame bumped up beneath it.

I reached a hesitant hand up to pull the curtain back. My heart beat in my throat. This wasn’t the beginning of a horror story at all. All that was missing was suspenseful music. And just as my hand was about to close around the cloth, a clawed hand captured mine, causing me to jump.

“You don’t want to be doing that, Lady.” Chess laced his fingers with mine and tried to lead me away, but I wouldn’t be discouraged.

“Who’s that?”

“No one of importance.” He huffed, placing himself between the frame and me.

“Then why does it matter if I see or not?” I tried to glance around his shoulder, willing the curtain to let me see the contents of the frame.

“Is anybody there?” The voice was feminine and low as if they were trying not to be heard. “It’s so lonely in here. Please help me.”

“Chess.” I placed my hands on my hips giving him my best stubborn stare. “I’m not leaving this spot until I see what is in there.”

“Believe me, Lady.” Chess placed a hand on my own. “Anyone who is in there deserves it.”

“Like I deserved to lose my head?”

“This...” He gestured to the hallway filled with cloth-covered frames. “...is the Hall of Mirrors. This is where all the very naughty Fae are kept.”

“Oh.” Well, that changed things. I couldn’t imagine leaving someone asking for help, but I also didn’t know what kind of Fae could warrant them a place like the Hall of Mirrors. For all I knew it could be a trap. I let myself be led away when the voice cried out again.

“But I’m not a Fae! I’m human!”

“What?” I jerked my arm away from Chess. He cursed and tried to grab at me.

It was too late. I had already gotten ahold of the curtain and was yanking it free. The red silken cloth fluttered to the ground like liquid fire and revealed someone I'd never thought to see.



Chapter 13

Hall of Mirrors

THE MIRROR WAS square and surrounded by an iron frame. Even in the dim lighting, I could make out the swirling glyphs, similar to the ones on the rabbit hole and on the prince's face. The mirror didn't reflect my face or the dungeon behind me. The surface was filled with an inky black substance, which surrounded the person inside. If I hadn't already been searching for her, I probably would have never been able to tell who it was.

"Alice," I breathed out.

Or what I thought was the head of Alice. Her long blonde hair floated around her as if she were submerged in water. A dull, blue bow still adorned her head, though it was a little worn around the edges. Pretty marble blue eyes gazed out at me from the grown up face of the beloved childhood heroine.

"Yes, that's my name. Alice Liddell." Her voice tinkled like little bells full of innocence.

I turned to Chess, bewilderment on my face. "How is this possible? The book came out in 1865. She should be dead, but she looks to be younger than me!"

"Well, I'm certainly not dead. I'm right here talking to you, aren't I?" Alice's brow furrowed. "Unless I am dead and this is my punishment for running away so often. Mother must be so worried."

Worry etched her pale face for a mere second before she beamed at me. "But the tea party was such fun! We would laugh and eat. Oh and the rhyming! I love the rhyming, though, I can't think of any rhymes right now. I really should go visit them again."

Alice looked to Chess with a pout, her eyes lingered on him longer than I liked. "Can I come out now? I promise to be good. I would like to say goodbye before I have to be home for supper."

Suspicion began to inch onto my face as I watched Chess shift in place, clearly uncomfortable with the young woman's pleas.

"Chess?" I prompted him to answer her. I wanted to know myself. Why would she ask him?

“It’s not my decision. I didn’t put her here.” He crossed his arms and turned his eyes to the end of the corridor. No doubt keeping an eye out for the guards he heard earlier.

“Then whose is it?”

“The one who put her here, I just said that,” the feline growled, his eyes still on the hallway. “Don’t you want to know why she is here? In the part of the dungeon meant for the worst of the Fae? The ones not even trusted enough to be cast out to the Shadow Realm?”

“But she’s not Fae. She’s human!”

How could they do this to their own people? It was inhumane. I couldn’t imagine being stuck in a mirror with no one to talk to, no way to tell the time or day. It would make anyone a little mad.

“Yes, I’m human. I don’t belong here!” Alice echoed me. Her head bobbed up and down from inside its frame.

Chess’ eyes flashed with the first hint of anger. “She’s no more human than I am.”

“What do you mean?” Why was he so mad? Did Alice touch a nerve somewhere in the teasing feline? I had so many questions and every answer brought on more.

“Alice, as you’ve pointed out, is quite older than she looks.” He finally made his way to the frame, his eyes trained on Alice’s face. She stared back at him, the picture of perfect innocence. “But what Alice forgets to mention is that she has been with us for a long time. Longer than I have been the mediator that is for sure. Haven’t you, Alice?”

“Have I? Perhaps I have, it is a little difficult to tell time in here.” Sarcasm dripped from her words, making her seem much older than I thought before.

Was I a fool to be tricked so easily? I should have learned by now that not everything was as it seemed, and sometimes it was even worse. But my poor judgment aside, something was still bothering me.

Mop had implied many times that Alice had lost her head. Was this what he meant? A collection of heads incased in mirrors seemed creepy even for Fae standards. At least the little standards that I knew they had.

I turned to Chess and questioned, “Why keep their heads?”

“She’s not just a head.” Chess scoffed and gestured to the mirrors along the wall. “The head is all you’re able to see. You could think of it as a window into her cell.”

“So there’s more of her?” I craned my neck to try to see around her, but all I could see was blackness.

I had already learned nothing good came out of the darkness. The creeping whispers that resided in the edges of the light promised horrors beyond even my imagination. But from the laughter coming from my flirtatious savior, it couldn’t be all bad.

“Of course there is more of her. Do you think we just cut off people’s heads?” A slight gleam of amusement glittered in his green eyes.

“Well, yeah.” I shrugged. “When they said you’d lose your head I thought it was literal.”

How could I not think that when everything there was taken so literally? How was I supposed to know the rules if everyone kept changing the game? I needed a ‘Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Underground.’

“Not so.” Chess stepped up to the glass of the mirror tapping it with a claw, causing Alice to flinch back and cry out in protest. “The inside of the mirror resides in another realm.”

“Another realm? I thought there was only the three?”

“There are, aside from the human world. Think, Lady.” He tapped the side of my head, causing me to wince and swat at him. “Where would the Fae put their trash so no one will find it?” The words sounded bitter coming from his mouth.

Once again I had the urge to ask Chess about his past. Why was he the mediator? If he was half-Seelie and half-UnSeelie, where were his parents? Why did he have scars all along his chest? So many questions to ask and not one of them easily answered. But one of my questions he had already answered.

“The Between.”

“Brains and beauty. A terrifying combination.” Chess flirted but his heart wasn’t in it.

“But the Between I saw didn’t look like any of this.” I gestured to the empty space around Alice’s head. “What I saw was all white and empty and went on and on.”

“Exactly.” Chess tilted his head, the silken strands of his pale pink hair spilling over the side of his face. I had to clench my fists to keep myself from running my fingers through it. “You are still thinking like a human and not like one of us.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, distracted by the magnificence of his hair. My own tangled mop would never cascade like that. I found it hardly fair that a cat had better hair than me, Fae heritage aside.

“You are thinking of the Between as something tangible, as a place you can mark on a map and be done with it. It is everywhere and nowhere all at once.” He held his hands out, bobbing them up and down to illustrate his point.

“But that doesn’t make any sense.” I knew it was a stupid statement the moment it came out of my mouth. When had any of this made any sense?

“Of course it does. When traveling between worlds there is a line you have to cross that melds one world into the other. That is the Between.” He gestured to the contents of the mirror.

“So the area with the doors, before I entered the Underground, was the Between that separates the human world from the others?”

“Right again, my pet.” He smiled, gesturing for me to continue on my thought.

“So then your home, the willow tree, is the Between that separates the Seelie and the UnSeelie?” My brow furrowed in confusion. “Where in the Between is Alice then?”

At that moment Alice piped in, terror making her voice quake, “They whisper in the dark, such horrible suggestions. All the things they want to do to me if only I would let them in.”

“The shadows,” I whispered, barely loud enough to be heard. Who knew if they were listening? I didn’t want to take the chance.

“They know what you fear the most, what will make you scream and quiver.” Alice’s eyes filled with tears. “I didn’t mean to do it. I swear. It was an accident. Please don’t let them get me!”

“It would serve you right,” the feline growled at the sobbing head, all teasing cast aside. “You wanted to be Fae, and you got it. I’d think you’d be a little more grateful.”

“What’s the point of living forever if I’m stuck in here?” Pretty tears glistened on her face. I had never cried so pretty.

“That’s not my problem. And we have dallied enough. Let’s go, Lady.” Chess stuck his nose in the air, turning on his heel to go further down the corridor.

“Chess, we have to let her out,” I called out to him. “Nothing could be bad enough for this kind of torture. We don’t even use the death penalty in my world anymore and that was reserved for serial killers.”

“How do you know she didn’t kill anyone?” Chess turned back to me. “Or worse? Would you just let them all go without a thought to why they were put here to begin with?”

“Well, no.” I frowned. “But some of them have to be innocent. After all, the White Queen was going to put me in one of these.”

“White Queen?” Chess held his stomach as he laughed. “Oh, she would love that. Believe me, Lady, her majesty is anything but pure.”

“I didn’t say she was pure. I am only speculating on what I see and what I know of the original story. But if the White Queen is as horrible as all that, I can’t imagine the Red Queen would be any better. Or would that make her the nice one? Everything is so backward from the *Alice in Wonderland* I know.”

“People talk about me? What do they say?” Alice’s blue eyes gleamed at the prospect of her popularity; all thoughts of the shadows were gone from her voice. How much of what she had said was real, and how much of it was just to get sympathy for her case?

“Why can’t they just put them in a regular cell?” I ignored the blonde in the mirror. “It can’t be safe to have them so close to the shadows. What if they attack them?”

“What makes you think they aren’t already?” A cruel gleam sparked in his eyes.

The look on his face was like a punch to the gut. Was he really just as cruel as the rest? It was hard to believe it to be true, but then again, I’d only known the feline for a few hours. How was I to know what was real and what was all for show?

“But Alice is right here talking to us.” I gestured to the girl pouting at being ignored. “If she has been in there as long as you say, shouldn’t they have attacked her by now?”

“If you are starving what do you eat if you can’t have your first option?” His fangs gnashed against his lower teeth.

I gulped at the sight. All thoughts of his mouth ever going near my body were gone in an instant. “You mean to say they are feeding on their dreams? But isn’t that cannibalism? If Fae feed on the dreams of humans, I would think the dreams of Fae would hardly be a meal. Besides, you can’t

just live off of the dreams of mortals. I saw lots of them eating and drinking at the mourning party.”

“Feeding on other Fae is not the same as feeding on a human. It’s like you are permanently on a diet. Just enough to survive, but not enough to satisfy the hunger.” His voice rumbled as if thinking of more than just food.

“What’s the point in feeding them if you are trying to get rid of them?”

“Fae are immortal. Food and drink is more of a want than a need. We can’t starve to death; it is harder than you think to kill one of us.” Chess frowned. “You have to remember they used to be one of us until they were cast out. It is hard for us to kill one of our own, even if they are evil. The only way to keep them from overtaking our worlds was to provide them with an alternative to feed on.”

He glared up at the girl in front of us. “And we wouldn’t need to do that if someone hadn’t ruined it all.”

“I told you I was sorry!” Alice cried out, but her face didn’t show an ounce of remorse. “I didn’t know what I was doing. It’s not my fault you Fae are so secretive about everything. You are a cat. You should know how tempting it is to discover the truth.”

“Curiosity has never plagued this cat, that’s for sure. I know when to keep my nose out of it.” He sniffed, pointing his nose in the air.

“I didn’t know what I was doing, or what it would do to the rest of the worlds,” Alice pleaded with the feline. “I was only trying to help!”

“Help? Chess, what is she talking about?” My frown deepened as I took in their exchange.

“Now don’t give me that ‘I didn’t know’ nonsense.” Chess brushed my question off, continuing to chastise the bobbing head. “You knew exactly what you were doing. They didn’t need your help, and you butting in only made the situation worse.”

“It always worked in books. She was supposed to get jealous and admit her feelings to him, not go commit suicide!” Alice scoffed.

“Who committed suicide?” I glanced between the two but was ignored again.

“That’s the problem with mingling with humans. You always forget we are Fae, not human. We don’t respond the same way to emotions as you do.” Chess finally glanced my way as if I were to blame.

“I know that now.” Alice huffed. “You bunch are stubborn and arrogant to the end. It’s always a competition of who cares more. You can’t

just tell someone you fancy them and be done with it.”

Her blue eyes turned to me in warning. “Be careful you don’t make the same mistake in trusting them to be reasonable, or you’ll end up in here too.”

“Why are you telling me?” I crossed my arms and tried to look haughty. She couldn’t know I was a human, could she?

“I might be a little crazy, but I’m not stupid.” She rolled her eyes. “I know very well what you are and how you got here. It may have been a long time ago, but I haven’t forgotten.” Her eyes became sad and distant. “Not much to do but remember here.”

“If they are feeding off your dreams, why aren’t you dead yet?”

“It not like they are physically injuring us. It’s like a piece of our souls are being eaten away one tiny piece at a time. It is quite a long process.” She glanced off to the side as if she were examining her nails.

“Wait a second.” I put a hand up. “You are telling me that you guys are torturing them to appease the shadows? That’s barbaric!”

“Hardly! It’s survival. We could just kill them all and be done with it. This way they are giving back to their community. Besides,” he gestured at the other frames, “this saves so much more space, don’t you think?”

I wanted to punch the stupid grin off his face. I kept forgetting that I was dealing with Fae and not humans. Giving back to the community he said. Ha. It was torture. Didn’t they have any compassion for their fellow Fae? Apparently, not.

“That’s not funny.” I placed my hands on my hips and glowered at him. We humans had to stick together. Never mind that Alice didn’t constitute as human anymore.

“I agree. As one of those sacrifices, it is neither amusing nor practical.” Alice poked her lower lip out in a pout.

I began to ask her how long she had been in there when I heard shouting coming from the direction Chess and I had come from. The guards. They had found my empty cell.

“Time to go, Lady.” Chess grabbed my hand, trying to lead me away from the mirror.

“Wait!” I yanked my hand back. “What about the key? Mop said I needed a key to get to the orchard. And Alice,” I pointed at the startled face, “has it.”

“Key?” Her blue eyes lit up. “You mean the faerie key?”

“Uh, sure.” I didn’t know what the faerie key was, but Mop said she had a key so that must be it. Besides, how many keys could she possibly have?

“I have it right here with me.” She rummaged around somewhere inside the mirror. “Ah! Here it is.” She gazed off to the side at something we couldn’t see. There was no way of knowing if she had the key or not. Not without being in her cell.

“Great. Can I borrow it?” My eyes darted to the corner we had come from, expecting the guards to be on us at any moment. I so didn’t want to get caught and thrown in one of those mirrors. I wouldn’t last one day being syphoned on by the shadows.

“Well, of course you can.” Her face scrunched up, frowning at the mirror. “The mirror does pose a problem, though.”

“Hurry up, my pet.” Chess gave my hand an anxious tug.

I glared at his impatience. Couldn’t he see this was my chance? I couldn’t go home without that key. Finding Alice had been a Godsend. I could skip the whole step of finding Hatter just so he could tell me she was here in the dungeon. But how was I supposed to get the key from her without having to go into the cell myself? I didn’t want to get anywhere near the Shadow Realm if I could help it.

I spoke what I had been thinking aloud, “How do we get you out?”

“Like the cat said, only the one who put me in can let me out.” Her voice took a condescending tone. So much for playing the innocent victim.

At that moment, a triad of guards spilled around the corner. One of the guards spotted us in an instant and pointed a finger in our direction. Fuck.

“There she is! Stop her!”

“No time for pleasantries, kitty Kat.” My rescuer pulled me away from the mirror and toward the end of the hall.

“But what about the key?” I gasped, trying to keep up with him. If I’d known I’d be running from more than my lack of social life I would have bought that treadmill my mother suggested.

“It’s not going anywhere.” Chess led me up a flight of stairs, stopping in front of a metal door. He didn’t open it immediately but stood there as if waiting for something.

“What are you waiting for? Open it.”

“I can’t.” He reached out to touch the handle, but then pulled away with a hiss as if it burned. “Iron hurts Fae.”

“Of course it does.” I moved past him and grabbed the handle, not expecting the tingling heat I got in return. Ignoring it, I shoved the door open. We spilled into the golden hallway as the guards hit the stairs. I slammed the door, trapping the cursing guards behind it.

I stood there trying to catch my breath as my other hand nursed a stitch in my side. The first thing I was doing when I got home was joining a gym. My stomach growled in protest. All right, the second thing.

I gave a cursory glance down at the hand that had opened the door. A pale pink, almost red rash had spread across it as if the iron door had caused some kind of allergic reaction.

Curiouser and curiouser.

Putting the mystery that was my hand aside for later, I glanced down both sides of the corridor in search of an exit. Unlike the first time I stepped into the Seelie Court, there weren't any tables or decorations of any kind.

Why did everything look the same? One could easily get lost in here. Seeing as it was where the door to the dungeon was, I imagined it was exactly what they wanted to happen.

“Which way?” I glanced down both of the identical halls.

“This way.” Chess headed down the right side, his tail swayed behind him as if he hadn't just been running from the guards.

It was getting hard to keep up with the emotional rollercoaster that were the Fae men. The women I understood. They were all perpetually pissed off by one thing or another, but the men didn't seem to know how they felt. It had to make that time of the month a frightening experience for everyone around.

The hall was quiet. We didn't see guards or any other Fae as we made our way down the corridor. Maybe the reason there weren't any guards was because they knew there was no way out. It wasn't a settling thought.

With no guards on our heels, it made me worry that perhaps they were stuck in the dungeon too. Certainly they had a way to communicate with those above? The White Queen wouldn't leave them down there. Would she?

“Don't worry, they'll get out.” Chess spoke up as if he read my thoughts.

“How did you know I was worried?”

“You get a crinkle between your brow right here.” He stroked a finger between my eyebrows. As usual, the gesture was more sensual than it really

needed to be. “When you are thinking too hard.”

“You don’t know me well enough to have figured that out yet.” I crossed my arms under my breasts, causing them to push up, and Chess’ eyes to wander down to them. I quickly dropped my arms back to my side with a slight blush.

“I don’t have to. Anyone could have figured it out if they paid enough attention.” He stopped in front of a mirror that was similar to the one in his house and turned to me, leaning in close with a smile on his lips. “And I pay *very* close attention.”

“Or I just think too much.” I leaned back from him, so I couldn’t breathe in his scent.

The big feline gave a masculine chuckle. The sound swept through me making my toes curl. He slid a claw down the side of the mirror, activating it. The surface rippled and gleamed like quicksilver.

“After you, Lady.” He swept his arm low in a bow, pretending to be the gentleman he wasn’t.

“Where are we going?” I stepped up to the mirror but didn’t go through. “I need that key, you know.”

“You’ll get your key, but first, we have to see Seer.” Chess laughed at his own pun.

I gave him a flat look. Everybody thought they were a comedian. It was hardly the time for jokes.

“And the seer will help us get Alice out?”

“Among other things.” Chess gave me a mysterious smile.

I frowned at him. I didn’t like that smile. It meant he was keeping secrets from me, either for some mysterious agenda, or his own amusement.

“Come, come now, my peach.” He placed a clawed hand at my waist. “Have I ever steered you wrong?”

“Not yet, but the night is still young.” It sounded cynical even to me. Had I always been like that or was it another result of being in the Underground?

Nah. It was just me.

I stepped into the mirror, the silver surface caressed me like an old friend. I wondered how the mirrors worked. How did it know where to go? Did Chess have to just think about it and it knew, or were there more mirrors spread throughout the Underground? Did certain ones only go to

certain areas? I tried to turn back to ask him, but the liquid kept me on a fixed path forward.

No going back now.



Chapter 14

Dreams & Satyrs

I STEPPED OUT of the mirror expecting to be back in the willow tree, but instead found myself back in the green hedges where I had first met the UnSeelie Prince. My eyes scanned the area taking in the little alcove surrounded by thriving hedges that stood at least ten feet tall. The hard cobblestone beneath my feet was broken and cracked. A potential tripping hazard, especially with the ridiculous boots Chess had dressed me in.

Somewhere off in the distance was the sound of water falling. It wasn't loud enough to be a waterfall, but unless there was a stream flowing through the middle of the maze, which was easily possible, it was probably some kind of fountain. Music blended with the sound of falling water.

It sounded like it was coming from some kind of pipe instrument. The tones were deep and probing as if they were trying to find out who was listening. I could feel them deep in the pit of my stomach. It was a little unsettling.

Ignoring the music for a moment, I turned back to the mirror. My reflection was the only image visible in its surface. The cool, solid glass pressed against my fingertips as I touched it.

Where was Chess? Had he gotten caught? Or did he expect me to go at it alone? Didn't he say *we* needed to find the seer? I glanced around the small enclosed area and realized how utterly alone I was.

Since the beginning of this adventure I'd always had someone beside me leading the way. I prided myself on being independent, on never needing anyone to take care of me, but here in this unfamiliar place, I wanted someone beside me. I never would have guessed I would miss my reluctant companions until this moment. I'd have given anything to hear Mop complaining about what a nuisance I was or Trip clinging to me as if I were his only friend.

But they weren't there. I was on my own. I could either wallow in it or move forward like I had always done.

The problem was I didn't know where to go. I needed to get the key from Alice, and to do that I had to find the seer. Whoever that was. I didn't

even know where to start. I could get lost in the hedge maze forever and never be any closer to finding the seer. How did I find someone by name alone?

The music from the pipes changed from searching to urging. It urged me forward to find it. My feet began to move.

I gritted my teeth, digging my nails into my hands as I tried to stop myself from moving. But the music became more persistent. It whispered inside my head.

If I found it, I wouldn't be alone. Someone had to be playing the music, and I could ask them where the seer was. It was a good idea. It was even a rational idea, but it wasn't the asking that was the problem. It was the thought of who could be behind that music. If they could make me come to them just from the sound of the pipes, then what else could they do?

Unfortunately, I didn't have any other ideas at the moment. The urging had become annoyingly insistent, like a buzzing in my ears, but I was able to keep my feet firmly planted where they were. After a few moments, the player seemed to give up as if I wasn't worth the hassle.

Of course, now that I was free to decide for myself, I wanted to know who was trying so desperately to get me to come to them. I hoped they were willing to help me find my way. Happy with my plan, I exited the alcove and headed north toward the sound of the pipes.

The green walls of the maze became a blur with each turn I took. Besides the occasional opening, every wall and pathway looked the same. The next turn left me staring at a dead end.

Growling at the wall, I plopped down on the stone floor. I could hear the sound of the pipes on the other side of the dead end, just a gigantic hedge away from me. I wanted to lean back against the hedge, but a flash back to a particular movie, where the foliage ate people kept me at a cautious distance. I settled for laying my head on my knees, and I tried to think of a plan.

The music became a soothing melody. It made me think of swaying palm trees and swinging hammocks. The night's adventure began to weigh on me. My eyes felt heavy and threatened to close at any moment.

It'd been well past nine o'clock when I left my house. I felt like I'd been in the Underground for days, when in fact, it had probably only been a few hours. My body told me it was well past my bedtime, not that I could tell by the sky.

Time must work differently in the Underground than at home. There was no sun for me to calculate the time, but the short time I had been in my cell had been enough for the sky to brighten to blue again. I wished I'd had the forethought to grab my phone before I left, then I could at least tell the time.

I glanced down at the ground and pondered how safe it would be to take a nap here. At least I was somewhat hidden away from view. I didn't want to be out in the open and wake up inside somebody's stew.

I wasn't sure what to do next. I couldn't get to the person playing the music. I didn't know how to get out of the maze, and it didn't look like anyone was going to save me anytime soon. Not that I needed saving. Maybe if I just laid here for a minute something would come to me.

I lay back on the hard stone, the coolness sinking through the thin material on my back. Staring up at the sky, I wished there were some kind of clouds to watch float by. My eyes grew heavier with that thought. I vaguely remember the hedges behind me starting to shudder. My eyes fluttered open and then closed, and then there was nothing.



I WAS DREAMING. I DON'T know how I knew I was dreaming. It felt more real and vivid than the hard stone I had fallen asleep on.

The dark forest lay before me. I was in the clearing where Hatter's tea party cackled and writhed, except this time there was no laughter or rhyming Fae creatures obsessed with tea. The table lay barren. The seats empty and table cleared. Only the ripped and stained tablecloth remained. How that made any sense was beyond me, but then again, this was my dream.

It seemed so long ago – a lifetime ago – that I had been sitting at that table watching them fight over the tea that may or may not have been drugged. I recalled Bat's gleaming eyes as he ruined each and every ploy his companions tried to use.

Back then; the creatures of the forest, the ones that hid in the shadows, had frightened me. But now in my dream state I relished in them. I stifled the laughter building up my throat as they whispered to me.

"Hurry, before he catches you."

That's right, I was running; running from someone.

My skirt swished around my ankles, the weight of it heavy against my waist. The sleeves of the dress wrapped around my arms left my neck and shoulders bare to the night air. With every step I took the bushes and branches blocking the way seemed to clear a path for my slipper-covered feet. My heart beat a rapid cadence in my chest, but not from fear. It was excitement. As if it was all a game. The point wasn't to get away but to be caught.

Running past Hatter's Tea party and into the woods beyond, I dashed behind a large tree. I pressed my back against its base as I tried to catch my breath. My chest heaved up and down, pressing my breasts up against the pale blue top of my gown.

I could hear him now. His footsteps were heavy on the ground, even though I knew he could be quiet as a mouse if he wanted to be.

"Come out. Come out wherever you are." His voice was filled with a dark promise of events to come, the kind no one dared speak of in polite circles. The ones only lovers did in the cover of night. I wanted what he promised. My blood thrummed in my ears, adrenaline pumped in my veins, and my body ached for it.

Time stopped as he approached my hiding spot. I held my breath, waiting for him to find me. I wanted him to find me. The thrill of it made the blood in my veins pound deliciously against the surface. My thighs pressed together at the thought of what he would do when he found me, of what we would do.

He made a small sound of pleasure, no doubt smelling the difference in my scent. Did he want me as much as I wanted him? Did I make his palms sweat? His heart race? His scent, like his face, never gave away his true feelings. The only way I would know for sure was if I were to come out and face him.

The last thought wasn't my own. He was projecting into my head, trying to get me to give in to him. But that wasn't part of the game. It was a match of wills.

Whose was stronger? Who could last the longest? I couldn't give in so easily. I couldn't be the first one to admit it, even if my body betrayed me.

"You can't hide forever, my love." His words were a deep caress beneath my skin that settled low in the pit of my belly.

He was closer now. On the other side of the tree. I was sure of it. I could probably reach my hand around and touch him if I wanted to. And I

did. I wanted to touch him more than anything in the Underground, but I couldn't be the one that started it.

It had to be him.

He didn't though. He didn't move from his spot on the other side of the tree, the only barrier between us. There always seemed to be something between us: politics, people, and realms. Something always got in the way, but not tonight. Tonight it was just us.

"Who's hiding?" My voice was a soft whisper, though I knew he could hear me. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the tree, angling it to the side, listening. Would he make the first move? Did he know he was supposed to?

After what felt like an eternity, he breathed against my neck, "I found you."

His hands slid around my waist as he brought my body in line with his. The swell of my breasts pressed against the hard plains of his chest. My eyes fluttered open to look up into the dark blue eyes set in an unblemished face.

They were darker than usual, almost so black that the pupil swallowed the iris. It could have been because of the night shadows, but I knew it was from something far more primal. If I had had a mirror, I was sure my own face would have shown the same look.

I kept my hands against the tree, not daring to touch him back. My eyes flicked from his gaze to his mouth and back. I moistened my lips with my tongue. His eyes fixated on the movement. A single clip held back his dark hair but threatened to slip free as he angled his face to mine. His face hovered above mine, teasing me with his lips, just a breath away from kissing me.

The forest's occupants quieted their whispers. Their urgings became a held breath in the wind, waiting for someone to break and close that final space.

I'd like to think he moved first, but in all honesty, I think we both did. My fingers tangled in his dark tresses, pulling his mouth closer to mine. There was no pretending anymore. Nothing keeping me from showing him how much I needed him. We melded our mouths together as if we were trying to climb inside the other.

Eventually, when kissing wasn't enough, he lifted me up by my thighs, pressing my weight into the tree's base. I came up from the kiss gasping at

the new sensation of him pressed hard between my legs. Our bodies began to rock against each other, slow and building until heat radiated from where our bodies met through the material of our clothes.

His eyes locked with mine before he pulled the bodice of my dress down, exposing my chest to his hungry gaze. Moving his eyes from mine, his mouth fell on the flesh there and was hot against my skin. I cried out against him, the pleasure building up until my body began to quake.

“Close,” I whispered into his hair while breathing in the smell of him. He smelled dark and rich, like a triple-shot mocha latte, and I couldn’t drink him up fast enough. As if reading my mind, he lifted his face to mine and captured my lips in another searing kiss.

Keeping our mouths locked, he moved and slid a hand between us to unfasten his pants, causing me to make a small sound of objection in my throat. His other hand took the brunt of my weight. I wrapped my legs around him to help ease the effort, not caring that we were out in the open and had an audience. All I could think about was how I needed more skin.

Before long, my gown was around my waist, and he was deep inside me. The bark of the tree bit into my back as we moved with swift determination, each of us seeking our own pleasure. The sounds of our lovemaking echoed through the forest, our audience quiet with anticipation.

I could feel it as it built in the air. Not the pleasure that flowed through our bodies, but something more tangible. It made the air thick and heavy as if it were a swelling, pulsating organ ready to burst at any moment.

Magic.

Our coming together was nothing short of spectacular, and the Underground responded by opening itself up just as I had opened myself to him. My gaze found his, awe reflected in his eyes. Each stroke made the magic press against our flesh, making each movement, each touch, more intense. It pushed until I was once again on the edge and couldn’t hold back any longer.

My legs tightened around him as I cried out. His voice echoed mine. It had been what the magic was waiting for. It gushed over us in a tidal wave of energy, alighting each nerve from the very ends of my hair down to the tips of my toes.

When we caught our breath we glanced at each other and laughed. We were high on the feel of each other’s skin and even more so on the pulse of

magic still clinging to us. Who knew such a thing would happen? We certainly didn't.

He adjusted his grip slightly, getting ready to put my feet back on the ground no doubt, but that slight friction was all the magic needed to push against us again. In that moment we weren't spent anymore, we were ready and willing to go again and again. If that was what it wanted.

Now I'm not against multiple orgasms in one night, let alone ones that are the result of a dark dream fantasy, but when the magic built us up again for the third time, making what was a leisurely, pleasurable act into a painful frantic need, I knew something was wrong.

I pulled my mouth away from his, tightening my grip on his hair to keep it that way. He didn't even pause or open his eyes to question me. His hips just kept moving in the tantalizing rhythm I had come to fear.

"No. Stop." My voice sounded distant and echoed in the dark forest but was completely ignored by my fantasy prince.

My mind fought against the need, even as I reached that edge again. I tried to drop my legs to keep my hips from moving with his, but I was frozen in a dance that wouldn't end until the magic released me, or I broke the dream.

Since I didn't believe for one second they would just let me go, I tried to think of something else. Anything else that would douse the flame inside me. Meat-jelly sandwiches. Moss-covered gnashing teeth. Mrs. Jenkins wearing a golden string bikini.

The last thought made me shudder and the blood in my veins began to cool, but the sound of a pipe playing in the distance surfaced in my brain. I focused on that sound, pushing at it with my new control. I didn't drift out of my dream as much as I got ripped from it.

My body still throbbed where the prince had been. I could feel my clothing, what little of them there were, pressed against my heated flesh. The music I'd heard in my dream had long since stopped, and in its place was the sound of a male voice chattering around me.

My mind was still a bit garbled from my dream, even as my brain began to panic, though a small part of me wished I had stayed with the blue-eyed UnSeelie prince.

What was up with that anyway? If I was going to have a fantasy about anyone I would have thought it would be Chess. Not the prince, who

besides a tension-filled dance and a heated kiss, had been a pain in my ass from the get go. I was never going to be able to look him in the face again.

“Shut up, stupid! You’re going to wake her up!” The gravelly voice smacked the other male, and was followed by a languid, “Sorry.”

I groaned and shifted, finding my arms pulled taut above my head and my legs spread out to either side. My panic began to build into full out hysteria. Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck. What do I do? What do I do!

“Now see what you did,” the first voice chastised the other. “Don’t struggle. You’ll just make it worse for yourself.” He tsk’d, his warning doing nothing to pacify me. “You should have stayed asleep. Enjoyed your little fantasy. You would have missed this whole part.”

I forced my sleep-encrusted eyes open and screamed at the creature staring down at me. It was a satyr, nearly seven feet tall. His broad shoulders and bulging pectorals did nothing to hide the fact that he was naked, save for the fur covering his legs and hooved feet. His chocolate brown hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail. The same hair trailed across the edges of his jaw and chin. His human face was attractive in the strong, Adonis kind of way, but the black lust-filled eyes beating down on my visible skin was as much of a turn off as the protruding horns on his head.

“Please don’t scream. I have a hard time performing when a woman screams.” His voice was smooth and buttery. Very gentlemanlike as if he had just stated the time of day. It was nothing like the one before, which meant someone else was there, hiding from my view.

I tried to glance around to see where the other voice was but could only see the hulking monstrosity blocking out the rest of the world. He leaned on one hand against the stone I was tied to; his other was tugging on the thickness hanging between his legs. I would have blushed at the sight had I not been so frightened, my prudish sense of decency null and void.

“That doesn’t make me want to scream any less.” I opened my mouth and screamed as loud as possible. The satyr before me covered his ears, bending over enough to let me see my surroundings. As I continued to scream, I took in where the satyr had taken me.

I was in a large, square courtyard surrounded by tall green hedges. I was still in the hedge maze. That was good to know. In each corner of the courtyard were tall trees that reached up and above the top of the leafy walls. If I cranked my head back enough, I could see a fountain against my

back. The water sprayed out of the mouths of scantily clad women just out of reach.

“Make her stop, Piper! Make her stop!” The becoming even less and less attractive satyr shook his head at my pained screeching.

I paused to take a breath and watched as a smaller satyr popped his head out from behind the crying giant. There was nothing remarkable about him. He had the same coloring as his larger companion, but he wasn’t near as handsome. He was the average Joe of satyrs. Not that I had more than him and his crying friend to compare them to. I wouldn’t have given him much more thought than that had it not been for the panpipe in his hands.

He must have been the one playing pipes that I had been following in the hedges. I wished I’d never heard those pipes to begin with. It was my fault for being naïve enough to think someone would help me.

Piper, as the other satyr had called him, brought the mouthpiece of the panpipe to his lips and began to play. Calming tones floated out of the panpipe, ceasing my panic mid-scream. All the tension in my body rolled off me.

Why was I screaming? There was nothing to fear. I was safe. The satyrs would take care of me. I sighed into the stone beneath me, not at all bothered by the restraints holding me in place.

“That’s a good girl.” My eyes rolled up to the larger of the two that was stroking himself in time with the pipe. I wasn’t so worried about the girth of him now. In fact, I was eager to please him. I arched my hips off the stone beneath me, trying to get closer to him.

The satyr gave a throaty laugh. “Hold on there, girly. All in good time.” He bent down to the top of my pants and tried to pull them down my hips, but the positioning of my legs kept them from moving more than a few inches. The satyr frowned at his friend playing the pipes. “Why won’t they come off?”

They weren’t the brightest Fae in the Underground. They caught me easily enough but were too stupid to take my clothes off before they tied me up. When Piper stopped playing to argue with his friend, my head cleared once again, and panic seeped back in. Part of me still wanted the satyr to touch me, while the other half urged me to start screaming again.

I fought against that urge so Piper wouldn’t play the pipes again, taking my free will away. I was on to their little game and would let them think I was still affected.

As I tried to think of a plan, my eyes couldn't help but be drawn to the large appendage hanging in front of me. Even if I was willing, there was no way that thing wouldn't hurt. It reminded me of this one guy in college I dated, Travis.

He majored in sex therapy and thought he was God's gift to women. One drunken night I had let him talk me into exploring my unbridled sexuality. It sounded like a good idea at the time. That was until he shed his pants and let me see what I'd be working with.

Though he wasn't as long as the confused satyr in front of me, the girth of him was about the same. It had taken a whole lot of foreplay, and almost a whole bottle of strawberry-flavored jelly, to make it even bearably comfortable. In the end, he still had to fight for every inch. I doubted the satyrs before me would be thoughtful enough to have brought lube – strawberry flavored or otherwise.

Not willing to take the chance, I shifted my hands in their bindings, judging the knots there. They were tight, but not so much that I couldn't wiggle one hand out if I had the time. Thank God for sloppy workmanship. If I could get the piper away, I could get one hand free while lug head was distracted.

Gulping my fear down, I tried to channel my inner porn star. I winced when my voice came out more running a marathon breathy, than ready for a good time breathy. "Untie my legs and then you can get them off."

The two quit arguing to stare at me. Piper frowned. "If we untie you, you'll just try to get away."

Fuck. Not as dumb as he looked. I tried to channel every bad porno I had ever seen as I bucked my hips up with an exaggerated moan. "But I need you now!"

"She won't leave, Piper." The larger one smirked down at my writhing form. "See. She wants me."

"I don't know. Maybe I should play some more." Piper brought the pipes to his lips, but at that moment, my curiously absent feathered friend swooped down and snatched his pipes away. "Hey! Give that back!"

I watched as Piper ran after the owl to the tree on the other side of the fountain. He hollered over his shoulder in between cursing the blessed bird. "Don't do anything before I get back, Romp."

Romp, the larger satyr above me, snorted and bent down to untie my legs. "Damn voyeur. Like I need him to fuck." He grinned up at me. "I'm

going to fuck you real good before he gets back.”

I bit my lip to keep from crying out in protest as he cupped me between the legs. “If you don’t bleed too much, I’ll let him have a go at you before I fuck you again.” I chewed the inside of my cheek until it bled as he stroked me through my pants. “If you survive we’ll keep you around, maybe even make you our wife, but if you don’t...” he shrugged his shoulders as if he weren’t talking about rape and murder. He stroked my face with his large hands and smiled. “I really hope you survive.”

Oh joy. I was going to be raped not once but three times. And if I didn’t die I would get to be their little wife forever, or until I died of internal bleeding, which was more possible than me ever being their wife. But at least I was in my right mind now, if he would just hurry up with the ropes before pipe brains got back.

While Rump focused on the ties on my legs, I twisted my one hand in its constraint, wincing as the rope rubbed my hand raw. Once it was free, I began working at the knot on the other one. I kept glancing down at my, hopefully not-soon-to-be-husband, giving him what I hoped was a come hither look. He responded by groping one of my breasts, stopping his work on my remaining leg. I don’t care what my sister says; I’m a great actress.

Though, the fact that I was more concerned with what my sister thought of my acting abilities than the danger I was in was more disturbing than I could process. I was going to need to see a shrink when I got home. If I got home. One problem at a time, Kat.

“Don’t stop now. We’re almost there. Quick, before he comes back.” If he was smart he’d realize he could take my pants off with only one leg loose. I was betting he wasn’t that smart.

“I’m trying.” He grunted as he pulled on the ropes. “There we go. Now let’s—”

As soon as the ropes gave, I kicked out one heeled boot into his low hanging bits, causing the satyr to cry out before doubling over in pain.

“You bitch!” Rump coughed out, grabbing his wounded parts.

Thank you, Chess! I was never going to complain about wearing high heels again. Or at least, not until I wasn’t in a *Beauty and the Beast* does rape situation.

I pulled on the remaining restraints on my wrist while peeking over my shoulder for Piper’s return. It wouldn’t do to get caught right after I got

free. I couldn't imagine how much worse they would treat me after my attack.

When I was finally free, I jerked my pants back into place and stepped up to the groaning giant lying on the ground. I didn't even hesitate when the heel of my boot connected with the side of his head, knocking him out cold. The human part of me felt guilty for causing another being pain, but another part of me, a dark part, held a deep satisfaction for the blood that trickled out of the wound my heel had made in his skull. It was a part of me I couldn't deal with right now.

Walking around Rump, I searched for the nearest exit, which as luck would have it, was right next to where my feathered savior was playing keep away with the panpipe.

I inched my way toward the exit keeping Piper's back to me. There was no way I was going to be able to get out without him seeing me.

Piper tried to climb the tree, but his hooves just didn't give him the leverage he needed to get him up it. As I approached the tree, the owl dropped the pipe when he saw me. I held my breath as the satyr grabbed the pipe off the ground, shaking an angry fist up at the owl.

"You better stay up there! I'll feed you to Romp for dinner!" He turned around grumbling under his breath. When he saw me, he opened and closed his mouth, gaping like a fish. "You!"

The hand holding the pipes moved toward his mouth, but this time I was ready for him. I grabbed ahold of the other side of the pipes, but the little devil held on fast. A tug of war began over who would get the pipes. I used my other hand to dig my nails into the back of Piper's hand until he jerked his hand away with a yelp.

"Hey, give it back!" He cried out, jumping on his short legs to reach the pipes I held just out of his reach.

I cackled and waved the pipes above my head. "Not so tough now are you?" I turned the pipes over in my hand, contemplating smashing them. "What should I do with you now?" I brought the pipes up to my mouth and gave it a test blow. I winced at the high-pitched note that sounded.

"Stop that!" Piper screeched, grabbing his ears. "Are you trying to kill us all?"

"It would serve you right." I gripped the pipes in my hands, so tight that my knuckles began to turn white. The fact that I had almost been raped

had finally sunk in as I stared down at the wooden instrument in my grip. They had almost—if I hadn't gotten free—

"To try and force me to," I screamed the last part out loud. My anguish clear in my voice as the wood cracked beneath my hands.

"Careful now! That's mine." Piper gave a frantic cry, his hand outstretched. "Give it back."

"How do I know you won't use it again to try and attack someone else?" My throat was raw from all the yelling.

"I won't! I won't. I promise. Just give it back." His eyes pleaded with me to believe him.

The forgiving part of me would have believed every word the little satyr said and would have urged me to give him a second chance. After all, he hadn't actually done anything to me, but not from the lack of trying. Romp, on the other hand, deserved every single thing he had gotten from me and more so. But the cynical part, the part that had grown more and more since entering the Underground, whispered to me. How do you know he didn't already do this to countless others? If he was willing to do it once, he would most certainly do it again.

"I want a blood oath," my voice came out hard and unyielding. "I want you to blood oath you will never use this pipe for evil deeds on pain of death."

"What?" Piper's eyes became wide. Not quite believing I would invoke such a thing. "But I—I won't do it again. There's no need to swear to that!"

"Then you will have no problem swearing to it." I tightened my grip on the pipes, the little cracking noise made my lips twitch. The sound of breaking wood quickly became one of my favorite sounds.

"Yes!" Piper screamed, his eyes fixated on my hand.

"Yes, what?" I held the pipes to my chest, his beady eyes followed.

"I swear it!"

"Say it."

"I swear on my blood, Piper's blood, that I will never do an evil deed using the pipes again. If I do, let the Shadow's reaper have me and send me to the never-ending darkness." When he finished he held his hands out, tears brimming his eyes. "Now please, please let me have my pipes."

"All right." I pulled the pipes away from my chest, but instead of handing them to him, I snapped the pipes at the seams, and then dropped

them to the ground. My lips curled at the satisfying crunch it made under my boot as I smashed it into tiny wooden fragments.

“No!” The small satyr cried out as he fell to his furred knees. “Why? Why?” He asked through choking sobs.

I stepped back as he crawled across the ground toward the remains. My smile turned into a disturbed frown at the pathetic mess he had become as he cradled the splinters in his hands. I shook my head from side to side as I backed away from the crying satyr.

I didn’t do this. I wasn’t capable of such cruelty. Even if they tried to rape me, I’d never—I’d never do something like this. I had to get out of here. I turned on the heel of my damn boots and fled through the archway.

“But I swore! I swore.” The sounds of Piper’s cries and the owl’s hoots chased me down a path of despair.



Chapter 15

The Seer

I RAN UNTIL my chest burned and my feet ached. I ran until the hedges became nothing more than a green blur. I didn't have a destination in mind. I just knew I needed to go. Get away from it all. Too bad I couldn't run from myself.

When I finally slowed down, I found myself surrounded by fungi. It was as if I had walked into the mushroom city. The colors varied as any city would. From dull pale yellow to bright neon green, and it didn't stop there.

There were mushrooms the size of houses, with thick stalks and large looming tops. Mushrooms the size of Buicks and ones with short stumpy bases, and tops so wide, I feared they'd fall over. If the tallest were the buildings, then the smallest were the people and children. There were tall ones with skinny stalks and short ones that were so fat around the middle I wouldn't have been able to fit my arms around them.

Had I shrunk? I hadn't drunk from any bottles with the words 'Drink me' on them. Or maybe it was another misnomer from the original telling?

I plopped down on a patch of cushy grass next to a deep maroon-colored mushroom with football-shaped black spots to catch my breath. My eyes were heavy and begged for rest. But no matter how tired I was; I didn't dare close them. I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to close them again. The thought of it filled me with a paralyzing terror. Is this what PTSD is like?

"What do you think?" I glanced up at my blue-eyed friend that had followed me from the maze and into the mushroom forest. "Do I need therapy?"

The owl shuffled in place on top of a bright pink mushroom with a strange inner glow. He cocked his head to the side as he hooted.

"I'll take that as a no." I sighed, picking at the grass beneath my fingers. My head was beginning to hurt from lack of sleep, and if that wasn't enough, its friend residing in my abdomen decided to make its presence known.

I placed a hand on my stomach, frowning at its emptiness. I hadn't eaten since dinner. Though, I didn't usually eat in the middle of the night,

which it was bound to still be, I also didn't usually do much physical activity, sleeping or not, if I could help it.

"What do you think, Mr. Blue Eyes? Are the mushrooms edible?" I asked my feathered companion once more. The owl wrinkled his feathers in response. "I suppose not. With my luck they're poisonous, or worse, hallucinogenic."

Or carnivorous.

I felt a little weird about there being so many mushrooms. It was like they were watching me. I half expected them to talk like the flowers back at the beginning – with hushed voices as they kept tabs on the goings on around them.

I pushed myself off the ground, my feet still aching in my boots. These boots were definitely not made for walking. I almost took them off to go barefoot, the cool grass would feel nice against my sore feet, but I was wary to be without a weapon. It was hard to be intimidating when you only had five feet and two inches to work with, not that the boots made me much taller, but at least I had a sharp, pointy end that would make someone think twice. Or at least a quarter more.

I opened my mouth to ask my unhelpful shadow which way I should go when a sickly sweet smell floated through the air. First, a small strand of smoke floated by, and then a huge honking cloud smashed into my face. I sneezed as the strength of it hit my nose.

Mr. Blue Eyes hooted and took flight in the direction the smoke came from. I frowned, and against my better judgment, followed suit. It couldn't be much worse than what I'd already faced.

My body gave an involuntary tremor at the thought of something worse than Piper and Romp. Thinking about them made panic rise up. It made my eyes burn and my throat constrict. I wouldn't cry. I knew if I started I wouldn't be able to stop. I had to keep moving, or I'd fall apart where I stood.

I made my way through the thick smoke, unable to see more than one foot in front of the other. I had to use the sound of Mr. Blue Eye's flapping wings as my guide. After a few moments, the smoke began to wane. We came to a stop before a circle of dark navy mushrooms that reached a foot above my head.

They were clustered together, their edges lined up against their neighbor. Atop one of the mushrooms was a large, rather plump, fuzzy blue

figure. The figure's back was turned so I couldn't see his face, but ringlets of smoke billowed up from where he was perched.

"Excuse me." I coughed, my voice hoarse from breathing in smoke. It shifted as if angling its head to listen. "I'm looking for the Seer. Have you seen him or, um, her?"

My new plan was to kill them with kindness, and if that didn't work, I could always throw my boot at them. I could be the boot ninja. I'd have a different pair of boots for every kind of weapon. Maybe even a blowtorch feature. I wondered how much something like that would cost?

"The Seer?" My attention locked onto the low, sultry voice coming from the figure. It was an unusual sound coming from the big, blue blob.

"Yes. Have you seen him?"

A slight chuckle shook the figure on the fungi; it paused to suck in a drag from its pipe. "Not today, but then again, I haven't been up long enough to find a mirror."

I cocked my head at the new information. This was the Seer? Well, it kind of made sense. The hookah pipe and the blue fuzzy exterior had all the makings of the caterpillar, and he was supposed to be old and cranky. I didn't expect to get much help from him if any at all.

The seer gave a languid stretch, and the fuzzy blue exterior fell to his waist to reveal a smaller figure. Large, vibrant butterfly wings fluttered on his back as he stretched and turned in his seat.

My jaw dropped. Mr. Caterpillar was not a mister at all, but a petite, albeit blue, miss. The bluish hue that spread across her skin fanned out into six pale white hands. Dark long lashes surrounded large eyes the color of obsidian. Full, hypodermic blue lips curled into a secretive smile on a strong but delicate face. Her hair, a periwinkle blue, was cropped short in a stylish pixie cut. There was nothing in her form that screamed masculine. If her face wasn't enough to determine her gender, than the slight curvature of her breasts hidden behind a dozen or so necklaces hanging down to the bottom of her ribs would have.

Besides the necklaces, the only other clothing covering her form was a tattered, multi-blue-hued skirt. The skirt spread out across her crossed legs as one foot hung off the edge of her mushroom perch. Next to her was a large hookah, almost as tall as her seated form. One of the six hands held onto the pipe attached to it and brought its tip to her mouth.

Taking a large inhale from the pipe, her eyes surveyed my disheveled appearance. “Though, I have to say, dear. I can’t look anywhere as bad as you do.” Her lips formed a teasing smirk as she fondled the tip of the pipe with her lips. “You’re late by the way.”

“Late?” I lifted an eyebrow at her, my eyes drawn to the pipe in her mouth. I admit it was an alluring sight. Unfortunately, my distaste of anyone that chose to smoke outweighed my intrigue.

“Yes. Late.” She pointed the pipe at me as she annunciated each word. “I expected you hours ago, but who’d have foreseen you attacking the satyrs?” Amusement glittered in her eyes.

Her mention of the satyrs made me cringe. I stared hard at the ground as my guilt and fear ate at me. I still hadn’t come to terms with what happened to me or what I did to them. Let alone what I was becoming.

“Now, now don’t look at me like that. Those satyrs had it coming.” She tapped the pipe against her hand, crossing her other four arms over her abdomen. “If it wasn’t you, it’d be someone else. Fae or human, it doesn’t matter to them, so long as they have some where to stick their cock.” She gave me a private grin as if we were best friends gossiping about boys. “But isn’t that the way with men? Always thinking with their little heads; it’s no wonder they have no room for much else in their noggins.”

“I guess so.” An awkward silence followed.

I was still a bit stunned that this chatty little thing was the Seer. She wasn’t anything like what I had read about. Wasn’t she supposed to be mean? And old? Though, as a Fae, old was measured by years, not the lines on their faces. I stared up into her blue face, trying to decipher how old she really was.

“Do I have something on my face?” She pressed a hand up to touch her cheek.

“No, no. Sorry. You’re not exactly what I expected. So, you’re the seer?” I gave a nervous laugh, tucking my hair behind my ear.

Three of the hands waved me off. “Not *the* seer. Just Seer. And don’t worry about it. I get that all the time.” She held up one of her arms examining the smooth skin there. “This is my thirteenth metamorphosis. I’m still not used to this new body. The last one was some old mean coot. After the incident with *her* I said to myself, ‘Seer, you need to be more hip with the younger generation.’ I was counting down the days until I could cocoon myself again, but enough about me. What about you?” I could feel

her eyes as they studied me. “I don’t always get the whole picture, so I can’t say for certain what I expected, but I hadn’t thought you would be so...” Her blue eyes lingered on my exposed flesh.

“Slutty?” I offered up, crossing my arms over my midriff.

“Enticing,” she finished, which wasn’t much better in my book. “And you seem to attract the most unusual company.” Her eyes lifted to my feathered friend that watched in silence. “Though, I am surprised you have tamed our feathered beast here. He’s not the nicest of Fae to be around. All those fleas to deal with.” She smiled at some inside joke I didn’t get, but Mr. Blue Eyes certainly did, and his hoot of irritation only made her smile more.

“Oh.” I blinked, not quite sure what to think of her heated gaze. I’d never been hit on by a woman before.

What is with these people? I was hardly the most beautiful human. They have had to have seen better ones. Is it because they haven’t had any around in a while? I suppose if I wanted a double decant chocolate cake, but only had the choice of vanilla ice cream; I’d take what I could get. I thought it was just the males, but apparently female Fae were just as sex driven as the rest. I wanted to ask her, but it didn’t seem to be the time.

Seer gave a good-natured chuckle at my discomfort before she jumped. Her wings caused her to float, rather than fall down from her mushroom bed. If I had tried that I would have twisted an ankle. Wings were a definite necessity when leaping from large fungi. I’d have to put an order in for a pair of my own.

While she descended down to the wingless rabble, her skirt flared up, letting me know just how little she was wearing underneath it. I turned my head and blushed.

Yikes.

She reached out with one of her many hands, and I tried not to flinch as she caressed my face. “Don’t worry, my dear, you already belong to someone else, and no matter how tempting, I don’t take what doesn’t belong to me, at least not without permission.”

“Well, that’s nice.” I pretended to ignore the dark glint in her eyes saying she really wished I’d give her permission. I didn’t want to be anyone’s, but if it was going to keep her from touching me more, then I wasn’t going to say otherwise.

“Come now, Lady. I know exactly what you want.” She took my hand with her dominant set of hands. My body gave an involuntary jerk when one of the lower hands pushed against the small of my back as she led me deeper into the mushroom forest. Mr. Blue Eyes followed in silence above our heads.

I watched Seer from the corner of my eye. Not without permission, she’d said. I had to make sure I didn’t give her permission, however that may be. I gritted my teeth as the hand on my back inched down closer to my butt than was polite. The multiple hands were going to take some getting used to.

She brought us to a stop in front of a large mushroom. It wasn’t much bigger than the others, but unlike the vibrant colors of the rest of the mushroom city, this one was black and charred. It emitted a dark hue around it that made my hairs stand on end. Weeds and vines crawled up its sides droopy and browning where it touched the mushroom, but in the center of the decaying plants was a mirror.

I didn’t like it. There was no reflection. No light gleaming on its surface, only a black emptiness. It was close to the darkness that surrounded Alice in the Hall of Mirrors, but this darkness was so much darker. If there was evil in the world – and I surely believed there was, who else would invent decaf coffee – then this mirror was the window to that evil.

I had the sudden urge to run back the way I came, but my eyes wouldn’t leave the mirror. The longer my eyes stayed on the mirror, the more it drew me in. Voices whispered underneath its surface, pushing to get free. They promised what no one else knew I wanted. Desires even I had never admitted to wanting.

They could help me find my way home. If only I would let them out. I didn’t need Alice and her stupid key. I could do it on my own. I’d be back home and curled up in bed before I knew it. All I had to do was let them out.

“Ow!” A sharp stinging pain pulled my eyes from the mirror to new crescent-shaped marks on my hand; blood welled up from each wound. I scowled at Seer. “What was that for?”

“Look.” She gestured with her second set of hands as she licked the blood from beneath the nails on her fingers. I cringed at the sight but glanced around myself.

My insides rolled. Seer had stopped us some ways back from the mirror, at least a couple of yards, but now I was only a few feet away from it. I backed up from the mirror, not daring to give it my back, but kept my eyes on Seer. I didn't even remember moving.

"What happened?" I asked even though I was fairly certain I knew the answer. I could still hear the voices whispering in my head, urging me to look back at the mirror. I fought against the urge and stared hard at Seer's nonchalant face. How was she so calm? The presence coming from the mirror alone was setting me on edge.

My guide gave me a knowing look, as if she knew I knew the answer to the question, but shrugged and indulged me, "You want to save her, don't you? To get the key?"

"Well, yes." I dared to peek at the mirror out of the corner of my eye. It felt like it was listening to our every word. "But I can't go through there."

"Of course you can."

"Even if I was willing, which I'm not, I'm not Chess. I can't just go through mirrors all willy-nilly." I jerked my thumb in the direction of the mirror. I took another cautious step back. I couldn't be farther away from it. Another planet was more preferable.

"Ah, yes. Cheshire." She smiled as if remembering a fond memory. With what I knew of Chess and his reputation with the other Fae, it was probably a perverted memory. I needed to ask him about that when he stopped shoving me through mirrors. "Why do you think he is able to use mirrors as portals and the rest of the Fae can't?"

"I don't know." I shrugged a little frustrated. Why couldn't anyone just answer me straight out rather than make me figure it out? I didn't have all night to play 20 questions. "Something to do with being the mediator?"

"But *why* is he the mediator? What makes him so special? Well, besides the obvious." She giggled a bit like a schoolgirl with a crush. Apparently I wasn't the only one smitten with the feline.

"He's a half-breed," I answered rather cross. "So, he's allowed to pass between worlds."

"That's right. The reason he can go between worlds so easily is because he doesn't have to obey the same rules as the rest of the Underground." She drew out a short smoking pipe from God knows where and teased the end of it with her lips.

"And what rules are those?"

“Rules are rules.” She waved me off, her answer not helpful in the least. I glared daggers at her, and she made a frustrated noise. “You humans are so impatient, always with the questions. It’s more fun finding the answers than the actual knowing, but if you are going to be that way, I’ll tell you.”

“That would be a nice change.” Sarcasm dripped from my mouth.

Seer floated onto a low toadstool, her skirts spreading out around her as she sat down. “The only way in or out of a world is with a key.”

“I figured as much since that’s what I’m trying to find. How—”

“Do you get a key?” She finished, giving her pipe a vicious tap. “You have to apply for one. There is a form and everything. If you get approved you are provided with a key that will allow you in and out of the Underground for a certain amount of time, when time is up, the key returns to the vault.”

“That sounds all very...” I paused, scrunching my brows. “Civilized.”

“Of course it is. We aren’t heathens. We have rules and processes that must be abided by just like anyone else. But you.” She pointed the pipe at me. “You broke those rules by coming here. You shouldn’t have been able to see the entrance, let alone get into the Underground without a key. Do you see what I mean?”

“I think so. But how did I get in in the first place? I’m not a half-breed like Chess. I don’t have any Fae blood in me. I’m just...just me.” I paused for a second, remembering the irritation that had shown up from touching the iron door. It was faded now, but it was still a bit pink. I spoke low to myself. “I am, aren’t I?”

“That remains to be seen. But if you gather all the evidence, it would point to the fact that you might not be entirely as you seem.” Seer stood from her post, leaning in close as she searched for something in my eyes. “Could be that one of your ancestors had a Fae lover.”

“If they did I never heard of it.” The thought of any of my family being with a Fae was ludicrous. They were all as prim and proper as my mother. Dad was the only one of the bunch that I could even marginally relate to with our joint obsession of books, but even he held the same high opinion as the rest of them. Though, grandma had always been the black sheep of the bunch. Perhaps she had one? It was something to add to my growing list to research when I got home.

“So, I’m a half-breed like Chess?” I quirked a brow at her.

“Hardly.” She snorted, her necklaces jingling with the movement. “More like a 16th, if not a 24th. Possibly even only the smallest iota of Fae blood in you.”

“But that doesn’t mean anything. I’m sure you get people like me in here all the time. How else would Al—, I mean, *she* get in here?” The entire no-name-saying bull was getting tiresome. Couldn’t they just be like normal people?

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” She crossed one leg over the other, her wings fluttered behind her, causing her to hover off the toadstool. “That was years and years ago. Back then anyone could come and go as they pleased. No key required. We don’t get many of your kind anymore. None in fact. You would be the first one in over a century.”

“But how can that be?” I tugged on the blonde part of my hair, wrapping it around my finger. “Surely, there was someone else? Someone else had to have seen the rabbit hole. A child maybe?”

“No. Just you,” she said in a sing-song voice.

“Why all the hassle? If humans were allowed before why not now?” It seemed all a bit stupid to me.

“It all comes round to someone poking their nose in where they didn’t belong and now.” She swept her arms about her. “Here we are. Everything was much simpler back then, none of this mind-your-tongue nonsense.” She waved her pipe in the air to iterate her point.

“What happened?”

The blue Fae gave a petulant sigh. “You could say we were put on house arrest for the action of one.”

“That doesn’t seem fair.” I frowned, catching sight of my feathered companion. Mr. Blue Eyes seemed forlorn at my words. Could owls even feel human emotion? It was a Fae owl, so for all I knew, he could probably talk and just wanted to make fun of me for talking to myself.

“Of course it’s not, but that’s just the way it is,” she said as if she had accepted their fate long ago.

“So, what did they do that was so bad that they had to punish everyone else?” Was this what Chess and Alice had been arguing about? She said she didn’t know what would happen. She was just trying to help. It was all very suspicious and conveniently aligned with the sudden ban on humans. “It wouldn’t have to do with a certain blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl, would it?”

“My, you are quick.” Seer beamed with pride, giving the owl a peculiar wink. “I can see why you are so taken with her.”

My owl blinked its blue eyes at her in response.

“But as with many ways of the Fae, it is far more complicated than all that.” She tapped the pipe against her lip in thought. “I suppose it would be easier to show you.”

Mr. Blue Eyes hooted in erratic aggravation. I eyed him while asking, “Show me what?”

“Well, I’m not telling you all this for free. Think of this as my payment for helping you out.” Her lips curled up in a mischievous grin.

I didn’t like where this was headed. I wanted to know what the big mystery was, but not bad enough to make a deal with another Fae. I was still left wondering when the prince was going to show his pretty head demanding retribution for sobering me up back at the Seelie Court. Though, I’d think he would owe me one after he got me arrested and almost thrown in one of those mirrors. Fair was fair after all.

“And how do you benefit from showing me? Doesn’t that just make me double in your debt?”

“Not at all.” She placed her feet on the ground, my eyes hypnotized by the swaying of her hips as she approached me. She slid a set of hands around my waist and another set caressed my arms as she slid the end of the pipe along the line of my lips. “You see, to show you, you’ll have to dream and—”

I knew where this was going. “You’ll get to feed off my dreams. Right.” Everything was about food for them. Well food and sex, but when wasn’t it?

“Good. You have been paying attention.” Her eyes flicked to my lips as if she were contemplating stealing a kiss.

My body was a rigid statue against hers. I was afraid the slightest movement would give her unwanted permission, and in turn, cause her to pounce. I wasn’t homophobic by any means, but she was pushing me so far out of my comfort zone even Sherlock wouldn’t be able to find me.

“Um, so I go to sleep and that’s it?” I muttered the words to keep from drawing any more attention to my mouth.

“Well, no. Not it, per se. I have to direct your dreams after all, or what is the point?” She took a step back, finally allowing me to breathe easier.

“Right,” I drew out the word. “What do I have to do? It doesn’t involve music does it?”

I didn’t think I could handle anymore musical adventures. I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to listen to music ever again. At least not anything the general masses approved of. Death metal sounded good. There were no pipes in that, right?

“No.” She laughed at the panic on my face. “There’s no music involved. So, tell me, Lady...” She pulled something from inside a pouch at her waist.

Seer stuffed a pinch of some kind of dried herbs into the end of the pipe. With a flick of her wrist, a small spark ignited it, causing lavender smoke to billow out the end. My stomach clenched in fear at the smell, even as my muscles began to relax.

Her black eyes glittered as she smirked at me. “Do you smoke?”



AFTER A FIRM, “NO, absolutely not.” I sat glaring at the pipe dangling between my thumb and pointer finger. I gave it a tentative sniff, which in turn caused me to sneeze. My face scrunched up at the pipe.

Smoking. I hated smoking. It stuck to clothing and it took forever to get the smell out of one’s skin and hair. I tried smoking once. My allergies were all kinds of fucked up for months. The heady effects were not worth the extra discomfort. Not to mention, cancer. No thanks.

“It’s not going to bite,” she remarked, not even having the decency to pretend she wasn’t laughing at me.

I gave her my best death stare. The kind I gave to the teenage couple who thought they could hide in a corner and make out and no one would see them. Really? How dare they? The library was a sanctuary for the studious and those in need of a vacation from real life. Not for swapping spit. That’s what the back of their car was for.

“You have to understand my hesitance after what happened. Let alone the disgust factor. How do I know I will be safe?”

The thought of being vulnerable after recent events would put me in therapy for years. It was quite sad. I couldn’t see myself being able to see another well-endowed male specimen without flashing back to Romp’s swinging in front of me.

How did one overcome a fear of large male genitalia? Would there be flashcards? Then after I was able to stomach those, we'd work our way up to dioramas, and then after many, many hours of dissecting every aspect of my aversion to large penises, there would be a parade of endowed men all for the purpose of healing my delicate sensibilities.

I found my ability to make light of my near-rape experience a good sign. Or I was trying to overshadow my terror with humor and sarcasm.

"I'll be right here." She gave me what she thought was a comforting smile.

"Oh, that makes it all better."

Sarcasm it is.

"Look." She sighed. "You won't even be asleep. It will be more like daydreaming. Not as satisfying as a deep-sleep dream, but I will take what I can get, and you will be able to get out of it at any time. I'll only be directing the dream. You will be in complete control. I'll even stay all the way over there." She fluttered her wings, lifting her off the ground and over to a neon green mushroom the size of a Hummer. She sprawled out across the top of it.

I gave her lounging form a suspicious glance. "How will you feed from there? Don't you need physical contact or something?"

"Why would you think that?"

"That's your thing, isn't it? The touchy feely, any chance to cop a feel?" I eyed the hand that had descended onto her stomach and was making a circular motion along her skin. My eyes jerked up to her face as one of those hands crept up to trace the edge of her breast beneath her necklaces.

Geez.

The butterfly Fae, or whatever it was she claimed to be, laughed at the heat that crept up my face before dropping her hands innocently to her lap. "We aren't all touchy feely as you put it. You're the first of your kind to step foot in the Underground in a long time. Not all of us have the privilege of visiting your realm whenever we like. So, you'll have to excuse those of us who are unable to contain ourselves by your presence. Your scent is kind of..." Her eyes darkened as she breathed in the air. "...intoxicating."

I shuddered at the thought. "So, you're like a recovering alcoholic who just had their first drink after ten years of sobriety?"

"Think more like an opium addict." Her eyes filled with hunger as if I were her next hit.

“But Trip and Mop didn’t act like I’m the very air they breathe. Don’t they feed on dreams too?” I gulped, not sure I wanted to know after all.

“They’re lower Fae,” she answered like it answered everything. “We are wasting daylight. Are you going to do this or what?”

“Just wait a couple of hours it will be daylight again,” I muttered, but then said to her, “What is up with the time thing anyway?”

“Are you trying to stall?” Seer’s black eyes narrowed. “The outcome won’t change, besides, I thought you wanted to know what all the fuss was about?”

I gave a disgruntled sigh and glared down at the somehow still smoking pipe. My eyes strayed to the watchful blue eyes of my feathered friend, wondering how he felt about all of this, but he just tilted his head as if to tell me to get on with it already. Frowning, I placed the tip of the pipe to my lips and grimaced at the taste of the burning herbs.

The smoke burned as it went down my larynx and into my lungs, causing me to break into a coughing fit. As my vision glazed over and my body relaxed into a trance-like state, an awful thought came to mind. What if she lied?



Chapter 16

Questions & Answers

THE SMOKE SPREAD out in front of me, taking up all the edges of my sight. It was as if I were inside an IMAX theatre. If the smoke was the screen, then my eyes were the projectors.

The mushroom forest was gone. Seer was gone, even though I could still hear the tinkling of her necklaces bumping against each other and the sound of her wings twitching on her back. There was one thing.

The mirror.

I couldn't see it, but I could feel it. Its presence pressed down on my mind, begging me to let them out, but my mind was on the screen of smoke before me. Figures began to form. Their outlines became clearer as I focused on the smoke.

"Let's start at the beginning, shall we?" Seer's voice cut through the hazy fog in my head and the White Queen became clear on the screen.

She was as I remembered, except less hard, less cold, but with a determination that would scare the primly pressed pants off my mother. "We can't let this go on any longer. The humans are starting to suspect."

"What do you suppose we do?" A black-haired woman formed in the smoke with dark blue eyes and sharp cheekbones. "You've rejected my suggestion. Quite spitefully I might add."

"And with good reason, Mab!" The White Queen glowered at the woman. Was this the UnSeelie Queen?

"Cousin, you know the rules! No names. Not even in private." She searched the room as if looking for an eavesdropper.

"That's ridiculous, Cousin." Indulging in the other queen's request, however silly she thought it.

"You won't find it so ridiculous when one of yours is called into the shadows one night never to be seen again. I might have power over air and dark, but even my power has its limits."

"You are admitting to not being all powerful?" The White Queen scoffed, but when Mab was silent she stiffened. "Truly? You're afraid of the dark?"

“Not the dark, the shadows. Don’t change the subject. If you would let us kill them rather than cast them out into the abyss, we could fix this whole mess.” She slashed a hand through the air, the black-netted lace of her sleeve whipped around her arm.

“We can’t just start killing our own kind.” The White Queen gave Mab a stern look as if chastising a child. “With the rarity of children amongst us Fae, there are hardly any of us left.”

“And whose fault is that?” she hissed at her. “Who’s the one who didn’t want her precious Seelie to cross breed with humans anymore?”

“They were diluting our magic. It had to be stopped before the Fae became nothing more than humans themselves. Excuse me for trying to save our race.”

Mab gave an unqueen-like snort. “You didn’t save us. You just delayed the inevitable, and now those precious Fae that you couldn’t kill, no matter how dark and demented, are going to destroy both our worlds on their way to an all-you-can-eat buffet where human is all that is on the menu.”

“Not if we stop them first.” The White Queen smiled mischievously.

“Cousin, what are you thinking?” Mab eyed her with a curious frown.

The White Queen’s smile widened, and in that moment, she was the most beautiful creature I had ever laid eyes on. The surface of her skin sparkled with the intensity of that smile. Her eyes alighted with a victorious joy as she said, “Have you met my daughter?”

Before I could hear Mab’s response, smoke covered the scene.

“Wait! I wasn’t done with that,” I called out to Seer.

“I didn’t do it.” Seer’s voice made me jump when it came out next to me. It was filled with concern and a hint of curiosity. “You have to come out of it on your own. Try clearing your mind.”

“I am trying.”

I really did try to do what she said. I attempted to clear my mind, to picture the mushroom forest, Seer with her multi-hued wings, and the mirror that chilled me to the bones. It didn’t matter what I did, the figures kept forming before my eyes.

Instead of being a spectator in the next vision, I was the star of the show. Their thoughts were my thoughts. Their feelings became mine. Until whoever I was had been lost.

“Did you hear? The UnSeelie Prince arrived today.” A familiar blonde walked arm and arm with me along a path in the garden. Instead of feeling

irritation at seeing the female twin, I felt a comforting companionship with her. It was weird to think of the vindictive blonde in such a way. My mouth moved on its own to answer my – friend?

“I had heard such news.” A sinking feeling overwhelmed me at the thought of the Prince of the UnSeelie Court.

Gab chuckled beside me. “Don’t sound so excited about it. Someone will start to think you care about your betrothed.”

“Hardly.” I snorted, playing with the ends of my pale blonde hair. “Everyone knows that this is a marriage of convenience. Nothing more.”

“Sure it is, but have you seen him yet? Don’t you want to know what he looks like?” Smiling at me, Gab trailed a hand along the metal fence lining the garden path.

I quirked a brow at my friend’s mischievous grin. “Why would I want to do that? I’m to marry him whether or not I approve of his appearance.”

“Well, I would want to know whose bed I’ll be warming for the rest of eternity.” Gab stopped in her tracks, pulling me with her. “And as you are my best friend and confidant, I did a little reconnaissance on your behalf.”

“Of course you did.” I rolled my eyes. The younger Fae always needed to know what was going on with everyone in the palace. It was for her own pleasure and hardly a selfless act in the name of friendship.

Gab sniffed. “Well, if you’re going to be like that I don’t think I’m going to tell you what I found out.” She stuck her nose in the air, pretending to be cross.

“Yes, you will. You can’t help yourself.” I dropped her arm and continued down the path, my attention half on the flowers around us.

Having never left the palace, I’d seen them all hundreds of times over. I’d never even seen all of the Seelie Court, but I was supposed to marry a complete stranger, and live with him all for the sake of solidifying our defenses against the Shadow Realm.

The hope of leaving the palace was the only reason I even agreed to the sham of a marriage to begin with. It gave me the chance to be free, to see new places, and to finally walk through the halls of my own home without the fear of who would lose their heads next. I didn’t need to know what my husband looked like. I’d marry him all the same.

“Oh all right, you’ve talked me into it.” Gab gave an exaggerated sigh and hurried to catch up with me. “You know all you had to do was ask.”

“But I didn’t ask.”

Gab ignored me and continued babbling, "So, I went down to the guest wing where they keep all the important people. Not that UnSeelie royalty is all that important, but anyway, I got stopped by one of his brute guards..."

As she told her story, I could feel the excitement radiate off her in waves. She always got this way when she had some juicy tidbit that she wanted to share. It was nearly impossible for her to keep a secret.

"...and then I said, I have as much right to be here as anyone." She scoffed. "Can you believe that? He actually thought I was a servant! Me! The thought of me cleaning." She shuddered.

"Maybe he didn't know." I shrugged my shoulders, pretending to show interest in her distress.

"Ha! Do I look like a lower Fae? No. Look at these cheekbones." She gestured toward her face. "Fae have killed to be as pretty as me."

I rolled my eyes. "Gab, that was one time, and they didn't die. They only ended up scarred."

"She might as well have died. I would have committed suicide if I had to go the rest of my life disfigured like that." Gab made a face at the thought.

"Not everyone cares about appearances." I offered and then tried to change the subject. "I thought you were going to tell me what he looks like, not his guard."

"I'm getting there." She waved me off. "So, I got passed the nasty guard and into the prince's sitting room and low and behold, there he was lounging on the couch like some half-breed. Really now, does he have no decorum? It is no surprise he wouldn't think twice about letting his guard down where anyone could walk in on him."

"He was in his private rooms, though. No one should have been able to walk in on him," I pointed out.

"But I did, so anyone else could have as well. I'm just saying; he should be a little more mindful of where he is, even if he is a guest. He is still UnSeelie. He could have..." Gab stopped mid-sentence catching sight of something in the garden. "Oh pooh, I was just getting to the good part."

I followed her gaze my eyes landed on a dark-haired Fae sitting on a bench with a book in his hand. With his attention focused on his book, my eyes trailed down his exquisite form. All thought of not caring about looks was smothered by a sudden undeniable need. When he glanced up from his book, my breath caught in my throat.

Eyes the color of the glittering night sky locked onto mine. The fierceness in his gaze froze me in place. There was anger there, but also a hollowed emptiness. I knew at that moment I'd go through with the engagement. Not because I craved freedom, or because he made my insides melt, but to make sure those beautiful eyes never gazed at me with such loneliness again.

The image of the prince faded from my mind as I slowly drifted back into my own head. For a brief moment, I was me again. I could hear Seer arguing with someone a few feet from me, but since I still couldn't see past the smoke all I could do was listen.

"I can't stop it," Seer explained to the unseen person. "I only started it. Something happened, something not in my control." She huffed, her frustration apparent. "It's not up to me now. It's up to her."

"She shouldn't have been here in the first place." A deep voice tingled down my spine.

I would know that voice anywhere. The sound of his voice as we made love was still fresh in my mind, causing my face to heat up. Hopefully they were too involved in their fight to notice.

"What did you think you were doing? You had no right. I should take your head for this," he growled at Seer. His words echoed, causing a new vision to form in the smoke screen.

Alice as she was now, adult sized and prettily arranged in her seat, sat as he berated her, tears glistening in her eyes. "I was only trying to help. They said I could be one of you and I am. Look." She tried to extend a hand out to him, but he was too blinded by his rage to give her a second glance.

I watched from between branches and peach-shaped fruit that shone like starlight. I was a spectator once more. My thoughts were thankfully my own as I looked down from the branches of the tree to those below me. The area was dim and surrounded by a stone wall, closed off to everything else except one door-shaped hole in the stone where two guards stood awaiting the prince's command.

"I'm quite aware of your new found abilities, Alice." When he said her name it sounded like a curse on his lips, and it caused the young girl to cringe. "Did you think for a moment that they could have lied? That they would tell you anything you wanted to hear? Just so you would do what they wanted?"

“But why would they want to keep you apart? Surely they could care less about your message?” She stuttered as she tried to rationalize her actions.

“You couldn’t be more wrong.” His laugh was bitter and heavy. “They have as much invested in my marriage as I do, except I have more to lose.”

“Why? What do they gain from breaking you two up?” Alice cocked her head like a child trying to understand grown-up things.

“That’s the question, isn’t it? And you will have plenty of time to think about the answer. Guards!” His voice rose as his anger spiked. “Everything that happens from here on out is on your shoulders.”

His words caused Alice to crumble into a heap of blue on the ground. Her cries racked her body and only grew louder when the guards wrapped their hands around her arms and dragged her away. The prince was left standing staring at the base of the tree.

“Where she lay buried beneath our roots. The boy cannot feel her, but his soul knows she is there. It will always know she is there,” a voice whispered in my head.

A voice I recognized. It was the same one that had kept urging me to come home. I wanted to ask it why was I here. What did it want from me, but I couldn’t get the words out as it continued whispering.

“It isn’t true. It isn’t the human child’s fault. The fault lies on those who came long before her, older than him, older than any of the Fae, or the humans. In a time when there was no love. No sadness. No hate. Only want. The want to have what one cannot.” Its voice was warm and oaky as its words caressed my skull.

“That’s why we gave the human child what she wanted. They think merging the light and dark together will destroy the shadows, the nightmares even the darkness fears. But they wanted. Oh, how they want what they could not have.”

My physical body shivered at the dark warning in its voice, but I kept my ears open as it whispered words only I could hear.

“So, we let them take our fruit. We granted the human child and the daughter of light’s wish, and hope the seeds we planted will be enough to save them. To save the humans, to save the Fae, to save us all.”

The smoke cleared from my eyes, slowly at first, fading around the edges until I saw double. On one side, a forlorn, but angry dark prince mourned his bride beneath a glowing tree. On the other, was the current

prince, flickering glyphs marring his otherwise beautiful face as he scolded Seer.

I sat there for a moment, gathering my bearings, not mentioning to the arguing Fae that I was back from my vision quest. I observed the prince's new attire. The blood-red shirt he had worn to the mourning party that caused him to stand out from the golden Fae was gone, and in its place was a black on black button-up shirt and fitted vest. It still bugged me that the Seelie would wear such an ostentatious color for a remembrance party. It was like they were declaring to the entire realm that yes their princess was dead, but they are still wonderful beings in need of worship and adoration.

Now knowing what I did, it was no wonder. Maybe they were ashamed of their princess. She committed suicide after all. Though, why was it still a mystery? I know it had something to do with Alice and the shadows.

Oh.

And the glowing tree.

I got the part about Alice wanting to be a Fae. She made a wish that the tree granted and somehow her wish caused the princess to kill herself. That was the start of the whole 'no humans' rule.

I also couldn't forget about the shadows that helped Alice get to the tree in return for breaking the couple up. I wasn't quite sure why the shadows cared so much about their marriage, but the White Queen and Mab, the Red Queen I assumed were planning on using them to beat the shadows.

That brought me to the no-names rule.

Mab was afraid of the shadows. She said some of her people had been called into the shadows and never seen again. Were they killed? Turned into shadows? Eaten? As more information appeared, I seemed to have more questions than answers.

"Lady, you're awake." Seer noticed me staring at them first as she rushed to my side.

Damn. I had been spotted.

"Are you all right?"

"Of course she's not all right. Look at her!" The UnSeelie Prince yelled, gesturing a hand at me.

Was there something wrong with my face? I didn't feel any different. I still felt like I could sleep a month and still be tired. I was still craving a double quarter pounder with cheese and a large slice of chocolate cake. I

was still creeped out by the mirror, which seemed even more aggressive than when I went into my vision quest.

Seer placed a hand on my face and frowned. “She does look a bit pale.”

Her other set of hands went to work taking my pulse and generally poking and prodding at me. The Fae must have been genuinely concerned because she didn’t once try to grope me or take advantage of my disoriented state.

“I’m fine, really.” I pushed my arms out in front of me, causing her to back up and give me some space.

“You are not fine.” His royal pain in my ass glowered at me.

Towering over me, his markings glowed hard enough that his eye was twitching. He must be in pain from fighting the spell. Why was he keeping it from changing his personality? What did he have to gain from being mad at me?

“Calm down. No need to pop a blood vessel.” I reached a hand up, tucking the blonde hair that had fallen across my face behind my ear. I froze. My eyes widened as I stared up at a curious Seer and a smug prince, my face filling with horror.

Blonde?

I lifted the strand of hair I had just tucked out from behind my ear. No, it wasn’t my imagination. My hair was blonde. I grabbed another section of my hair and felt an ounce of relief when my usual bright orangish-red hair glared back at me, but growled when I grabbed another section, and it was blonde as well.

What the fuck?

I stared at the blonde chunk in my hands, not quite believing what I was seeing. I was used to having a random section of blonde. The hair I was holding was exactly the same color as the one at the nape of my neck.

It was a blonde so white it was near impossible for me to color my natural fiery red to it. I wouldn’t have cared so much if it had changed all of my hair, but to only change bits and pieces? I dreaded seeing it in the mirror. With my luck, I looked like some punk rock reject.

“How did this happen?” I questioned the no longer twitchy prince. His smug smile showed he had finally let the magic on his body smooth over his personality. I honestly couldn’t decide which way I liked him better. Both sides of him made me want to deck him.

“Why don’t you ask your new best friend, since you seemed perfectly all right with her watching over your mind, body, and soul?” Though his face held the usual teasing grin, his voice held the biting heat of anger. He kept his icy blue gaze on me as he addressed Seer. “Go on, tell her.”

Seer crossed her arms, all six of them over her torso. “I hate to break it to you, your highness, but I didn’t do this.”

The prince’s attention jerked to her. “Of course you did. You know the risks of feeding directly from a human.” His eyes flashed dark. “Or has it been so long you have forgotten?”

“Like I would lose control like that? I’m not some lower Fae.” She seemed offended he would even suggest it.

“Then how do you explain that?” He pointed at my whitened hair, making me grip the pieces as if to defend them.

I scowled at them. What was the big deal? Yes, my hair was a mess, but what did that have to do with Seer feeding from my dreams? I wasn’t as worried about my hair as I was the mirror – its presence felt like a two-ton truck was crushing me.

“Would someone tell me what’s going on?” My voice became a bit breathless. How did they not notice that thing?

The UnSeelie Prince grabbed my arm, jerked me to my feet and pulled me to the mirror. I dug my heels in as he tried to drag me to it. I so did not want to be any closer to it than I had to be, but his damn Fae strength far surpassed my own. Not that it was hard to do. Working out for me mainly consisted of lifting stacks of books to put back on the racks and walking to the fridge.

The closer I got to the mirror, the harder it was for me to breathe. I focused on my breathing, keeping my eyes on anything but the mirror, which ended up being the Fae prince himself. I couldn’t help but compare this version of him to the one in my visions.

His face was hard with anger and determination, and if I had to guess, he was a bit afraid. What was he afraid of? The glyphs on his face didn’t take away from the beauty of him, especially since I knew what he looked like without them. His eyes were flirting between the dark and icy blue.

The icy blue made me think of the White Queen, since she placed the spell on him it was no wonder she had given him her trademark blue eyes as part of his punishment. I was more partial to the dark blue color. They contrasted so much better with his pale skin and dark hair.

“Look,” he demanded, his eyes locking with mine. While I was caught up in watching him, he had done something to the mirror. Waved his hand in front of it, sprinkled it with faerie dust, or whatever. I’d been fighting not to pay attention to the mirror, but as he watched me watching him, I chanced a glance at it.

It wasn’t black anymore. The frame was still charred, but the mirror was clear and reflected back what I had pretty much guessed I looked like, a punk rock wannabe. My face was paler than usual as if I was suffering from a cold. My hair had more of the white blonde than red to it now, as if I had streaked it red and not the other way around. But the part that mystified me, the part that caused me to lean in closer to the mirror to get a better look, were my eyes.

My eyes, which were usually the color of a newly cut Christmas tree, weren’t completely my eyes anymore. Bleeding into the green was an icy blue, causing a weird ring around the middle. In any normal setting, I would think it was pretty awesome. People had completely fucked up their eyesight by wearing color-changing contacts, and I now had my very own set of freaky eyes, but how they got that way was disquieting.

“How did this happen?” I asked, still staring at my new eyes as my foot took an involuntary step closer to the mirror. The pressure from the mirror had eased up for some reason. Not that I was complaining, it made it easier to breathe.

“It’s a side effect of the feeding, which I never got around to because someone...” The blue-haired Fae glared at the prince. “Jumped in just as it was getting good. Only a lower Fae would be careless enough to lose control when feeding directly from dreams. It’s unheard of in us higher Fae. We have more control than that.” She smirked at the scowling prince. “Well, most of us anyway.”

“Who else if not you?” Accusation rang in his voice. “There isn’t any other Fae, or do you think my abilities are not up to par?”

“I would never insinuate that, your highness.” Though, her voice implied that was just what she had done.

If they didn’t do it then who did? I placed a hand on the mirror as I leaned in even closer to gaze into my eyes. The instant my hand touched the mirror the whispers were back tenfold, and the heavy weight of the mirror crushed me to my knees.

I tried to pull my hand away, but it was stuck in place. The blue in my eyes grew larger the longer my hand was there as did the blonde color of my hair. The red had all but become inch-wide streaks along my scalp.

My eyes darted around to the others, frantic that I couldn't let go. Seer and the UnSeelie Prince finally stopped fighting enough to notice what was going on. The fear that had crept up their faces, even as they fought to keep calm, set me on edge.

"Lady," Seer coaxed as if the slightest movement would cause me to go into hysterics. "Let go of the mirror."

I gave a tired chuckle. "Gee, why didn't I think of that?"

"You don't understand," the UnSeelie Prince stated in a calm and reassuring manner. "Opening yourself up to be fed on this close to the Shadow Realm has allowed them to hijack your life force. That's why you're changing so quickly. They're trying to drain you. Someone should have known better." He glared at Seer who had the decency to look ashamed.

He knelt next to me, placing his hand on mine. I could feel his breath on my face. I would have been embarrassed to have him touch me, especially after my little fantasy he had starred in, but I couldn't think past the whispers in my mind.

His hand was warm and engulfing on top of mine. He gave a firm tug on my hand as he commanded the mirror's occupants. "You know the rules. Let her go." The prince's own magic pulsed down my hand and into the mirror.

The whispers turned to screams in my head, causing me to wince. They didn't like being told what to do. Not one bit.

In that moment, they decided to give up their façade. The darkness in the mirror didn't so much as creep back into the glass as appear. It had only pretended to let the prince control it, so they could get me closer. Now that they had their teeth in me they weren't going to let me go.

They whispered how good I tasted. They hadn't tasted someone so powerful, someone so old, in centuries. They were tired of barely getting by on the dreams of their fellow Fae. They wanted fresh dreams. Human dreams. My dreams.

I didn't have the energy to fight them. I'd been awake too long. Too many life-changing events had happened. I was exhausted both physically

and mentally. I only wanted to sleep and they jumped on that want, pressed their magic into it, causing my eyes to droop.

I couldn't stop it. Even as the Fae prince shook me, even as he yelled in my ears to fight it. Their voices were barely a hum above the whispers in my mind urging me into the darkness.

Their whispers were a menacing lullaby that promised everything and nothing at all. As the edges of my vision darkened, my hand slipped through the mirror and I tumbled face first into the Shadow's Between.



Chapter 17

The Shadows

IT WAS COLD. Even as I slept I could feel it down to my bones. An icy breath crept along my skin. If I had been awake I was sure I would find someone hovering over my body. A large looming figure, so dark in my mind's eye I couldn't quite comprehend what I was seeing. Its presence, even as I slept, pressed upon me, drinking me in, leaving me frozen and empty inside.

Its voice, no longer a whisper, burned my ears. Neither male nor female, but both at once. "We don't know how you got in. The Fae queens claimed to have closed off the human world from the Underground, but here you are." It seemed amazed at such a feat. "We have been here, forgotten in the dark for many centuries as they go about their endless lives."

I knew my body was asleep, but I tried to ask it with my mind. "What are you?"

"We are the Fae who have been cast out by the courts. The court of light with its need for perfection and disgust for anyone different would not dare sully themselves with our deaths." It gave a bitter laugh. "And the UnSeelie court, where even the most gruesome Fae are welcome, wouldn't even give us sanctuary."

It shifted its massive body above me. It was close enough for the hairs on my skin to rise up at the cold. "We've been waiting here in the dark, waiting for someone who would help us, feed us, and set us free. We never expected our savior to be such a puny human, but you will do." Their laughter echoed through the blackness.

"How can I save you? I'm just one person. One human." I questioned it in my mind. "I can't imagine I'm enough to sustain all of you?"

"Ah, but you are not like the others." As if sensing my confusion, it went on. "You are like us. Of this world, but not. You do not belong to either world and they do not claim you as their own. It is a rarity indeed."

"But I'm human, not Fae," I protested, my fear growing to a substantial size. "I can't save you. I can't even save myself."

It tsk'd, its many voices coming together as one. "Let there be no lies between us. You are human yes, but more. We were there listening at the mirror's edge. What's said is said, no going back now." I flinched as dark formless fingers tried to caress my face. "Do not fear us, for you will be our Lady, and we your people. We can give you everything you desire. Power."

An image was thrust into my mind. I was a mighty queen. No, a goddess. My hair burned around me like a fiery crown of glory. I had the world at my fingertips, and it quaked at my every whim.

"Wealth," they whispered as another image filled my head. I was adorned with jewels of every shape and size as I lounged on a bed of furs.

"Love." This time, the vision didn't just fill my mind, but it filled my body with a pulsating need. I could feel the hands of each and every Fae that had been lost in the darkness as they caressed me and touched every inch of my being inside and out. Each touch promised undying love and devotion. My heart would never be empty. My bed would never be cold. I would never lack companionship.

The last image made me realize something. This wasn't what I wanted. It's what *they* wanted. They had been cast aside, powerless, and unwanted. Yes, they wanted revenge on the courts, but they weren't evil by nature, only necessity. The shadows were exactly that, shadows of the Fae they once were, but they were still Fae, and Fae had rules.

"A place to belong, as we crave to belong. You will be ours, and we will be yours." Their voices pressed upon my skin, urging me to accept them, to be with them.

It's not like I wasn't tempted. Who didn't want unlimited power, more money than you knew what to do with, and people that would always love you? Even the most holy of men would have been tempted. But there was always a price, and with the Fae, the price may not be something I was willing to pay.

"You claim you are the Fae forgotten, but faded or not, you're still Fae." I could feel their curiosity pique at my words.

"Yes." The simple word hissed along my skin.

"Then you still have to obey the rules." I made it a statement, not a question.

The shadows shifted their massive form as displeasure filled their voice. "The Fae magic still holds us captive, but you could fix that. You

could be the new law of the world. Of all the worlds.” It tried to change the direction of the conversation back to me, but I wouldn’t be deterred.

“But for the moment the law still stands.” I was proud the voice in my head didn’t quiver with fear as I neither denied nor accepted their offer. “And that means you have broken that law.”

Shocked and disgruntled voices rose up around me. “We break no laws, Lady.”

“Then tell me, when exactly did I give you permission to feed from me? I don’t remember us ever making a deal.” My voice hardened with my accusation, even as my fear fought to suffocate me.

The voices began to argue. They knew I had not given permission for them to feed off my dreams, and the Fae were all about permission. Evil Fae or not, rules were rules.

“But you wish to save the Fae pretender, do you not?” The shadows questioned. “We have brought you to her, so it is a fair trade to let us feed from your delectable dreams.” It purred as it tried to placate me, its voices now back in agreement. “The winged Fae could not fulfill your bargain.” They laughed. “She could not bring you through the mirror. She is too tightly bound by the UnSeelie Court.”

So, she had been lying after all. Or maybe, she knew that this would happen. The prince said no Fae in their right mind would try to feed off a human’s dreams so close to the Shadow Realm, and Seer didn’t seem the stupid sort. Did she know the shadows would take the bait? That the only way for me to get into the Shadow’s Between was to be dragged there by one of them? Even if she did, the shadows still broke the rules.

“That all may be true, but the deal was with Seer, not you. You can’t pass off a deal from one Fae to the next.” I was full of shit. I didn’t know if you were allowed to pass them between one another. Hell, I barely knew what was going on half the time in this cockamamie world. I could only hope that I was right and they were in the wrong.

Their displeasure rolled off them in waves, their voices so loud my eardrums felt as if they would burst. I thought they would strike me dead then for daring to question their reasoning, but they didn’t. They made sure that they were not touching me at all as they reveled in their anger. I was thankful for it, because as much pleasure as their caress could give, I’m sure they were much more skilled in pain.

The shadows' anger calmed after a few moments. Their voices lowered to a dull drum and their fingerless form reached for me once again. They petted my hair and rubbed my arms as if I were the one who needed calming.

"You are more worthy a leader than we thought. To see the logic and injustice of our actions," they praised me. "We shall make a new deal now, so there will be no questions about it."

"But you already stole your payment. A deal can't be made from stolen goods," I scolded them.

"You are here, are you not?" It growled at me, their anger leaking through. "We have already paid for the dreams we've taken without permission. A verbal transaction is all that is necessary to make it right."

"Rules are rules," I quoted Seer's words. "I didn't ask you to bring me here, and you didn't ask to feed from my dreams. You bringing me here was all on your own. If I'm to be your salvation, your lady, would you expect me to take such crap from a Seelie? Or even an UnSeelie?"

The looming shadows cried out in protest.

"Then why would you expect me to accept yours? As I see it, you owe me for the dreams you stole, and I demand equal payment. Only then will I consider being yours." I nodded to myself since my body was still inoperable.

They moved amongst themselves, debating my words, and whether they should agree to my terms. They would have to if they wanted me to cooperate. I still wasn't sure what exactly they wanted from me. I wasn't anyone's savior, let alone fit to be queen. All I wanted to do was get the key from Alice and get the hell out of dodge. I planned to sleep until next week, screw my mom and Sunday dinner.

"Very well." They came together at once. "We accept your terms. What is it you would have of us?"

I thought about it for a moment. What did I want? Being able to move would be good.

I must have thought the words too hard, because they asked, "And that would make us even?"

"Not hardly." I scoffed. "Why am I even unconscious anyway?"

"You were tired, your body needed rest." Their reasoning made sense, but once again they had done it without asking. Maybe that was why they got kicked out? They had problems with following the rules.

“Well, I am rested enough. Let me up.” If they had heads, I would have sworn they exchanged glances as if they were not sure they should do as I asked.

“We admit you are not simply resting. After so many years of being in the dark, of living off the dreams of the headless, we have lost physical form. We are but a mass of energy on the wind. The thing in the dark that you dare not look at for it might look back. Thus, we are impossible to be heard to those who are not listening. We are able to communicate more clearly this way.”

Their words reminded me of all the dark corners I had encountered in the Underground. They were the whispers that treaded along the edges of teeth, giggling in the dark at my naiveté as I questioned about wishes. I do remember the pounding on Chess’ willow, so they must have some kind of abilities. They couldn’t be completely powerless.

“You’re Fae, can’t you use magic? A glamour? Or I don’t know, shapeshift or something?”

“If we could glamour ourselves, would we not have done so to blend in with the other courts?” Their voice rose to a shout, but a few whispered off in the edges. “We could take on the appearance of one of the headless.”

“We could not do that!” The others argued back but soon changed its tone to question. “Could we?”

“Yes we could, but it would require a sacrifice. A death to make the magic work.” The mass turned back to me at once in agreement with each other. “Do you wish us to destroy one of the headless?”

“What? No!” I couldn’t let them kill another Fae just because I wanted to wake up. No matter their crimes. “There has to be another way.”

They sighed. I could feel their frustration as well as the rage lurking just beneath the surface. They were becoming tired of my demands. The few that I had anyway. I knew they wanted me, no, needed me, but I could tell they were weighing the odds of dealing with me and getting what they wanted. Whatever that was.

“There is one who may die at any moment, what of them?” They inquired, apparently coming to a unanimous decision that I was worth the effort. A relief really.

“What do you mean? I thought Fae couldn’t die of natural causes.”

“We can’t, but they have been here for hundreds of years. A Fae’s dreams can only be fed on for so long before they are nothing more than an

empty husk. This one is such a Fae. We would be taking pity on them, to end their life now rather than lay dormant, not much more than a lifeless doll.”

I tried to weigh the pros and cons of their suggestion. I couldn’t imagine living that way: a brain dead vegetable just waiting for death to claim me. Death would be kinder, but there had to be a catch somewhere. Death magic sounded dark and ominous – evil in every sense of the word. But I didn’t see any other way out of my dream state. I couldn’t lay there forever, and if it would bring someone else peace I could be all right with it.

“Fine. Do your death magic and let me up,” I demanded before I could change my mind. I waited for them to start some kind of chant or to feel a magical pull, but nothing happened. “Well, are you going to do it or what?”

“It’s already done.” The voice that spoke was no longer filled with many voices, but with one singular voice. It was light and quirky with a hint of an accent I couldn’t quite place, and it was decidedly male. Thankfully, it was nothing like the overpowering sound of the massive shadow. “Come, come now, all the fuss to wake up and you won’t even open those pretty eyes of yours.”

Ignoring the prodding to open my eyes, I flexed my muscles first. An arm. A leg. I wasn’t 100 percent positive it was already done. Shouldn’t death magic take more preparation? At least, some kind of dead language to call the Fae to their grave. Not that I was complaining. I could do with a little less complicated and a lot more straightforwardness.

When I was sure I was able to move my body, I placed a hand beneath myself and pushed myself upright. I peeked one quaking eye open.

I had expected many things when I opened my eyes. A blinding white room, like the first Between I entered, or a monstrous dungeon-like setting with chains, and maybe even a rack, or at least an iron maiden. I was kind of disappointed when I opened my eyes to a dungeon corridor, much like the one I had escaped in the Seelie Court.

“Not what you expected; is it?”

I jumped at the voice next to my ear and spun around, backing away on my hands and knees.

The man before me held up his hands in defense. A silly lopsided grin graced his slender face. Of all the prisoners to take the shape of, they had to pick someone that I would be attracted to. It wasn’t like I didn’t have enough of a problem with the prince and Chess.

He had dark brown hair that was tousled on top but short along the sides. The hair ran into sideburns that ended just below his ears, near the dark chocolate brown eyes that crinkled at the sides as he continued to smile at me. His hands were in the pant pockets of his black suit, and he rocked back and forth in a pair of beaten trainers.

“What exactly was the guy you are wearing guilty of?” I couldn’t help the small smile that crept up onto my mouth. “Bad fashion sense?”

“Ah-hah.” He laughed a much more carefree sound than before. “That’s funny.” He held a hand up, turning it back and forth as he examined his new body.

“I think he was some kind of time wizard. A funny lot they are. Academic hermit types. Always jumping about in time at a whim, never really paying any mind to the chaos they are ensuing in the other worlds. This one was the last of his kind. The Seelie Queen made sure of it when he was caught trying to change the outcome of our birth. Nasty business that was.” His voice was so jolly and full of life it was hard to tell if he was serious or not.

I inched up from the stone floor, keeping my eyes on the man before me. Was this really the monstrous shadow that had me quaking in my bones just moments ago? It was hard to believe. It also didn’t help that I was a sucker for a guy with great hair, which left me with the overwhelming urge to run my hands through his.

Why couldn’t they have picked someone less attractive? It was going to be impossible to remember he was the bad guy, but then again, that was probably the point. Lucifer couldn’t have persuaded so many to follow him if he was all terror and gruesome. Being enticing was part of the thrill of evil. Why would the Fae be any different?

“Now.” He clapped his hands together, rubbing them in anticipation. “What would you have of us, Katherine?”

I stopped in my half crouch and waited. He knew my name. Something bad was supposed to happen if they found it out, wasn’t it? My life force was supposed to drain away. My will taken from me. But as I crouched there, and my knees began to ache nothing happened.

He chuckled at my stance and shook a finger in my direction. “Now, haven’t you been listening, Katherine?” My eyes met his when he said it again. “You aren’t like the others.”

I eased to my full height, what little of it there was, and watched him as a child would a distant relative: curious, but cautious all the same. Though he had a pretty face, I had to remember what dwelled beneath.

“So everyone keeps telling me,” I grumbled, dusting the invisible dirt off my backside, so I could pretend I had something to do as I assessed him. “So, you know my name, what now?”

“Well, that’s up to you.” He circled me, his long legs stretching out before him with each step. He was so tall.

“Up to me?” I frowned at him.

“I demand equal payment,” my voice rang out of his throat sounding strange and foreign to my ears. He smiled at my startled face, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “Or did you change your mind and letting you up was enough?”

“I haven’t forgotten our deal. I’m just...” I searched about the corridor for some inspiration, “...not sure what to do next.”

He moseyed – yes, moseyed – over to me and brought his face close enough to mine that I had to lean back to meet his eyes. “While we are your humble servants, may we make a suggestion?”

I took a step back as his third-party reference reminded me once again who was under that pretty face. “Sure.”

He moved down the corridor and gestured at the many doors lining the walls. All of which seemed to be made of solid iron with no locks and no windows to peek out of. I supposed they didn’t need a lock if the prisoners couldn’t touch the door, let alone what awaited them outside of their cell. Though, in his current form, he didn’t seem threatening to anyone.

“You came to find the pretender, did you not?” He stopped in front of one of the doors and pointed at a metal nameplate bolted into the wall. “What was her name again?”

“Al–” I started to say but caught myself at his cheeky grin. “I don’t remember.”

He frowned at my lie. “There’s no use lying. We’ve been feeding off her and at one point we knew her name. But this guy’s head,” he wiggled his fingers at his head, “Has gotten us all jumbled up. It’s hard to tell where his memories end and ours begin.”

I marched over to where he stood, anger rising in me. “I thought you said he was a husk of a man. Nothing more than a vegetable? How did you get his memories if that were true?”

He scratched the side of his head with a finger, his eyes cast down to the ground. "Well, you see, it's a complicated process. Lots of long words to do with atoms and particle separation and—"

"Make it simple then," I growled, crossing my arms over my chest. I didn't like being made a fool, and while I was still wary of the Fae man, I'd rather be angry than scared any day.

"Fine." He narrowed his eyes at my command. "We are him. Or I am him. Every thought, every memory, and every feeling he has ever had is lodged right up here." He tapped the side of his forehead. "He exists no longer except when we are in this form."

I could only gape at him. It was impossible to process the enormity of what he had just admitted to. He, no, they hadn't just taken on his appearance; they had taken over his body, his very being, and made it their puppet. The Fae that had belonged to that wonderful face didn't get to pass over to the next world. He didn't get to die with dignity like they had led me believe. It was unacceptable.

"How could you do this? How could you just destroy another living being? One of your own? What have you done? What have I done?" I cried out, the horror of what I had allowed them to do stabbed at me.

It was my fault. I had told them to do it. I didn't even think twice about what it would mean to take on another Fae's face. I was only thinking about getting home.

"Now, now. There, there." He reached a hand out to pat me on the shoulder as the grief overwhelmed me. "What's done is done. No use worrying about it now. Unless..." he paused, his hand stroking the edge of his chin. "Unless his life was payment enough to make us even?"

"What?"

"You have to admit it seems like a fair deal. His life for your stolen dreams. More than fair I'd say." He gave a slight shrug of his shoulders.

I stood appalled that he would even try to get out of our deal by playing on my guilt. I was upset with what happened, but I wasn't stupid. I knew I had the upper hand, and I wasn't about to give it up for a mistake, no matter how regrettable it was.

"We will be even when I say we are even, and as far as I'm concerned, we are far from even." I pushed past him to get a better view of the nameplate. I growled at him over my shoulder. "Could you move back a little? I can't read anything in this light."

“Our apologies.” I rolled my eyes as he placed his hand on his chest and gave me a half bow. He was as bad as Chess.

I squinted at the markings on the nameplate when his shadow wasn’t blocking it. The name wasn’t a name at all. It was just a set of initials.

“Who the fuck is J. S.?” I wondered aloud.

“Hey! Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?” He frowned before glancing down at the nameplate.

The fact that a being of ultimate evil, well, in those shoes ultimate was a questionable description, but for him to be scolding me about my language was laughable. Wasn’t cursing a sin? Ranking in the evil category, technically, it would be a minor sin, but any sin I would think would be encouraged, not chastised.

“And that’s the Fae in there. They only label them by initials, because they think it gives me less power over them. Not that they can keep from telling me their name for very long. I am after all, very persuasive.” He gave me a lecherous smile that unfortunately had my insides tingling.

Damn my libido.

“How long are you going to keep that face?” I noticed he had started to refer to himself in first person, which must mean he was losing more of the collective thinking and becoming more like the time wizard he had absorbed.

As I walked down the dungeon hallway, I wondered how long it would take him to become the Fae completely. Would he no longer want revenge on his fellow Fae? I would hardly think it would be that easy.

He strolled down the corridor, glancing at each nameplate as he went. “As long as you require it of me.” He paused in his search and tilted his head so some of his hair fell over his face in such a cute manner; I had to force my eyes to the door next to us.

“Do you not like it?” He held his hands up and twirled about like a model on a runway. “I could take someone else’s form if you wish?”

The smile that was in the process of creeping onto my face went south. “No! I mean; you’re fine the way you are now.” I ended lamely, continuing to search for Alice’s initials.

“Fine? Just fine?” He frowned, not at all happy with my response. “I took this form for your pleasure. I could have easily chosen someone else and all you can say is fine?”

“What do you want me to say?” I stared hard at the door in front of me. I wasn’t here to pick up guys. I didn’t want to be here at all. So his appearance was the least of my worries. “This is it.” I pointed at the nameplate that had A. L. engraved into it.

“That you find me irresistible,” he continued, disregarding my discovery. “Don’t you?”

I glanced up into his blinking, brown eyes and wondered how in the world a mass of vengeful energy could be self-conscious. Why did he care what I thought? They said they wanted me to be their lady, but certainly they didn’t mean in a physical sense?

Staring up into his eyes and seeing the intense hunger lying just beneath the surface, I realized they did. They had gone centuries without a friend or lover. No one to touch or hold them. Of course they hoped to have me – mind, body, and soul. Emphasis on the soul part.

“Yes, I find you attractive. Now, can we please,” I gestured to the door before us, “Focus on the problem at hand? How do I get into her cell when there’s not a door knob?”

I didn’t know whether he believed me or not. He leaned a shoulder against the wall and nodded toward the door. “All you have to do is knock.”

“Really? That’s it?” My brow rose at the simplicity of it. “That’s not very secure.”

“To someone like you it’s not, but to a Fae, that are deathly allergic to iron, a single touch would bring on such excruciating pain the very thought of it is enough of a deterrent. Besides...” His eyes filled with a wicked gleam. “The thought of me being out here terrifies them more than being trapped inside.”

The reminder that underneath that silly grin was a force so fearsome Fae would rather be imprisoned forever than face them caused my own fear to spike. There was more to the shadows than they would lead me to believe.

He gave a curious sniff to the air and growled. “I thought we dealt with this already? I’m not going to hurt you, so your fear is unwarranted. How can I get you to trust me?”

I took a deep breath and tried to quell my quaking insides. “Trust is earned, and it isn’t fair to use my scent against me. Not to mention, disturbing.”

“My apologies. I had forgotten how limited human senses are. It won’t happen again.” His head dipped down, but his eyes looked up at me through his lashes.

I turned from his ashamed face and knocked on the metal door. The heat against my knuckles was instantaneous. I jerked my hand back with a yelp and glared down at it. Unlike the door from the Seelie dungeon, which only led to a mild irritation along my skin, my knuckles turned bright red and stung enough to bring tears to my eyes.

I glanced up from my aching hand when the door began to whine and creak. I took a few steps back as the door inched open at a painstaking pace. I craned my neck as each inch revealed what lie inside.

Alice’s bell-like voice tinkled from the cell. “What took you so long?”



Chapter 18

Alice

AS FAR AS cells go, especially ones in solitary confinement, Fae had it far better than any human prisoner. The stone walls were draped with colorful curtains and pictures that depicted enchanted forests and faerie getaways. The stone floor was covered with a beige fur rug that looked soft enough to sleep on. Not that anyone would want to sleep on it when the overstuffed bed covered in pale lavender silk sheets was available to sink into.

The mirror, which gazed out into the Seelie dungeon, was covered once again, leaving the frame cloaked in red. Next to the mirror was a bookcase. It filled one entire side of the cell and was jam packed with so many books it would make any bookworm drool. Next to the magnificent bookcase, lounging on a long chaise with a book in hand, was Alice.

She was no longer a floating head, Alice's pale blue tea dress was draped over her lap, while a single barefoot dangled off the edge of her perch. Like her bow, her dress had seen better days. There were holes where moths had gotten to it and stains from what could have been grass, but had faded from time.

"Well? Are you going to stare all day, or were you here to rescue me?" Alice huffed, tossing her book down as she stood from her chair.

"I know why you were put in here," I blurted out without thinking.

Alice quirked a blonde brow, amusement sparkling in her eyes. "Oh, do you now? Is that why you took so long? Trying to dig up the goods on dear Ole Alice? And here all I was trying to do was help you?" She smirked as her eyes took in my disastrous hair. "Tell me, was it worth it?"

"Like you were trying to help out the prince?"

If it would end with me six feet under, I didn't think I wanted the type of help she could give. The shadow man gave a silent laugh as he stood just outside the door, and out of Alice's line of view. At least someone thought I was funny. The number of fans I had was dwindling by the minute.

Alice made a noise of disgust. "Of course no one told you the whole story. I can hardly be surprised. Fae just love their half-truths. 'Isn't it more

fun to figure it out on your own?” She imitated Chess’ voice perfectly. So, Chess had spoken to Alice on more than just the one occurrence. It made me wonder what else he had bent the truth about.

“Well then, why don’t you tell me what really happened?” I crossed my arms over my chest, tired of her games.

A slow smile spread across her face. It was one of those smiles that I had learned meant whatever she was about to say I wasn’t going to like.

“Let’s make a deal. I’ll tell you my sad story and in return you get me out of here.” She clapped her hands at the brilliance of her own idea.

“But I’m already letting you out in exchange for the faerie key.” I frowned at having to remind her.

“Well, what do you want more? The truth or freedom?” She held her hands out as if to weigh the options. One hand was empty while the other held a small brass key with a red ribbon looped through it to be worn as a necklace.

I took an involuntary step toward the hand with the key, and she snapped it shut, holding it behind her back with a grin. Alice may have been human at one time, but now she was Fae through and through. Games, games, and more games. I wasn’t leaving without that key, but I also wanted the truth so badly I could taste it, but how could I get both without offering up something more in return?

My own lips curled into a smile to rival her own as an idea formulated in my mind. Keeping my eyes on Alice, I called out behind me, “I’ve been horribly rude making you wait in the hall. Why don’t you come on in?”

I didn’t need to turn around to know when Alice saw him, the blood draining from her face and the slight step back made it easy enough to guess.

“You!” she stuttered, clenching her hands to her chest. “What are you doing here? I haven’t been bad. I haven’t been bad, I promise.” When my companion did not answer, her eyes turned to me in desperation. “You can’t let them take me. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Ah, but weren’t you just going to try and trick me into taking a different form of payment?” I turned my head to look back at the shadow man, who had an amused grin on his face. “I did hear her correctly, didn’t I?”

“That’s what I heard, love.” The sound of his voice had taken a threatening edge that didn’t match the smile on his face.

Alice searched between us, confusion on her face. “Wait. You’re together?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that—”

“Yes, don’t we make a lovely couple?”

I glared at the shadow man for interrupting me. “Not yet, we aren’t.”

“Ah, yet. That only means a when not an if, and I have plenty of time to wait. I’m a patient man after all.” His voice was full of promises, but his eyes had not left the Fae girl before us. The hunger in his eyes had nothing to do with Alice’s appearance and everything to do with food.

Alice gulped at the intensity of his gaze and turned to plead with me, “You can’t trust them. They’re liars. They don’t want to help you—”

“And how is what you’re doing any different?” I interrupted her with a shake of my head.

“But I was human once. I know what it’s like to be tricked by them.” She pointed a shaky finger. “They’ll make you believe they can give you exactly what you want, but you’ll end up regretting it in the end. Look what happened to me.” Her fear turned to anger as she whipped her arms around the cell. “I’m stuck in this hell hole because I listened to them. I should have been a good little girl and went home to my mother.” Alice buried her face in her hands and cried. “Being a Fae was supposed to be romantic and exciting, but it’s not. It’s boring and it never ends. I should have died a long time ago. I just want to go home!”

I sighed. I hated crying women. As a woman, crying was not something I liked to do. Tears were meant for children and mourners, not everyday problems. Especially when the tears were unwarranted, like Alice’s were right then.

“Oh, pull yourself together.” I crossed my arms becoming angry at my own discomfort. “It’s been over 100 years, there’s nothing for you to go back to, so there is no use crying over what can’t be changed. You’re a Fae now. Suck it up and deal.”

“How can you be so cruel?” She sniffed, peeking up from her hands, her face puffy and red.

“Lady is right.” I jerked my head to the shadow man, who had stepped into the cell, his presence causing Alice to take a few more steps backward. “She’s not being cruel, she is being practical, but if you are really dissatisfied with your existence I could easily end it for you.” He reached a hand out as if to touch her.

Alice shook her head, her eyes wide and once more filled with terror. “N-n-no. Don’t come near me. Don’t touch me.”

I watched with mild fascination as she became more hysterical the closer the shadow man came to her. I could understand her fear, I had been before the masses and knew the sound of their collective voice, the feel of their touch on my skin and their breath on my face, but unlike her, I still had options. She could only die, and with her death, her key would be free for the taking.

“Please, no.” Her eyes sought me out, begging me to help her. “Help me and I’ll tell you! I’ll tell you what happened. Just keep them away from me!”

I was half tempted to let him have her. I was tired of making deals, but I also wanted to know. Damn my curiosity.

“Stop,” my voice rang out just as he was about to touch her golden head. “I still need her.”

He turned to me with a frown on his lips. “Are you sure? I could just...” He held a hand out as if to touch her anyway.

“Yes. I’m sure. Are you questioning me?”

He frowned harder at the authority in my voice and something in his eyes flickered at being commanded. He didn’t like my demanding tone. Not at all.

“No, but if you change your mind...” He dropped his hand and stepped back to stand beside me.

“I won’t,” I snapped, my eyes locking onto his, daring him to question me again. I liked being in charge and making the rules. I could get used to this.

I turned my attention back to the blubbing girl before me and grimaced. “He’s not going to hurt you, so stop your crying. I’d like to get out of here as much as you.” I exited the cell, not waiting to see if she followed.

“Which way do I go to get out of here?” I asked the shadow man. He put his hands in his pant pockets and rocked on his heels looking this way and that. “You do know how to get out of here, don’t you?”

“Just hold on a second.” He waved a hand at me. “There are many ways out. I am thinking of the best one. I wouldn’t want you to end up somewhere unpleasant.”

“No, you wouldn’t want that,” a sarcastic voice said from behind me. Alice had finally decided it was safe to leave her cell and stood in the doorway glaring at the shadow man.

“How did you change so fast?” I eyed her new attire.

No longer was she clothed in a stained and torn blue dress, but instead, she wore a black dress covered in red heart and spade patches. Her legs were encased in black tights with small red buckled shoes. She had small, red tea gloves and a miniature red top hat, adorned with a black feather.

“Isn’t it lovely?” She held the knee-length skirt out around her. “I thought it up myself a while back, but hadn’t had a chance to wear it until now.”

“Did you make that?” Still a little in awe of her clothing.

“Oh, silly.” She laughed waving me off. “Of course not. That’s my gift.”

“To make clothes?” I quirked a brow at her. That was a shitty power. If I was going to become a Fae, I’d want a better power than that. Like the ability to mute someone when they were being annoying. Or even to be able to eat anything I wanted without gaining a pound. Now that was a power I would give my soul for. There were so many possibilities, but changing my clothes at will, would not even have crossed my mind.

“I can do a lot more than that.” She slid her hands up across her face and revealed my own face staring back at me but on Alice’s head. “It’s called a glamour.”

I gaped and took a step back at the un-canniness of the face she had made. She had gotten every detail, down to the last freckle. Even her eyes matched the blue green clash that was my irises rather than my usual green. She slid her hand across her face again and Alice was looking at me once more.

“Now, tell her what naughty things you had to do to get the power you are so proud of,” the shadow man hissed at her, causing her to step back, fear flashing in her eyes before she glared at him once more.

“I only did what *you* told me to. I am hardly to blame when I didn’t have all the information – Fae and your half-truths. The lot of you can go to the reapers for all I care. Save the rest of us the trouble.”

“Funny, you say so, when you wanted to be one of us bad enough to leave your world behind,” he barked out, his lip twisted up in a sneer.

I rolled my eyes at them. We were going to be here forever.

“Weren’t you figuring out what exit to use?” I offered up, turning the glaring Fae’s attention back to me.

The shadow man frowned for a moment, clearly confused. “I already know which one.”

“Well?” I gestured for him to lead the way.

“Fine. This way.” He marched down the corridor, the carefree swagger he had obtained from the time wizard gone.

I took a step forward to follow him but stopped when Alice stared back into her cell. “Alice? Aren’t you coming?”

She didn’t immediately answer, and her voice was soft when she did, “I’ve been trapped for so long I’m a little scared to finally be free.” She gave me a small smile. “Silly, isn’t it?”

I watched her, not sure how to respond.

“Forget it.” She shook her head and walked past me toward where the shadow man had gone. The heels of her shoes clicked on the stone floor.

I gave a cursory glance to the empty cell before turning on my heel to catch up with her. What was it like to be imprisoned for centuries? Alone in a room with nothing but yourself as company? Did she get many visitors from the other side of the mirror?

I thought back to our previous conversation with Chess. She had pleaded with him first to be released, like she knew who he was and what power he had. Once again I wondered if they had met before.

“Alice?” I walked alongside the young woman.

“Hmm?”

“Have you and Chess met before?” I kept my eyes on our guide who didn’t give any indication that he was listening to our conversation.

“What do you mean? I’ve been locked up since before he was born. Of course I’ve never met him.” She scoffed, examining her hand as her gloves flickered between colors.

“But why did you ask Chess if you could leave back when we first met if you’ve never met him before?” I blew a strand of blonde hair out of my face, once again wishing for my hair tie that I had lost at the entrance.

She finally settled on a pale pink for her gloves, which spread out to her dress and hat. “I didn’t say I’ve never talked to the cat, just that I’ve never met him. Seeing the cat with you was the first time I’d ever had a face to the voice.”

“But he’s in all the stories, so you must have met him before. Maybe you just don’t remember?”

Alice gave a snort, rolling her eyes at me. “I think it’d be pretty hard to forget a delicious man such as Chess.”

I couldn’t argue with her there, the cat did leave an unforgettable impression.

“Besides, you know more about these stories than I do. I’ve been kind of busy being locked up and everything.”

“Well, if not Chess, then some other cat? It doesn’t make sense for it to be in the stories if it never happened.” I frowned at the sarcasm in her voice.

The blonde tapped her chin as she thought about my words. “Well, there was that one cat, but he was quite rude. Very cryptic about everything, and he was just a big fur ball. Nothing at all like Chess’ masculine physique.” Her cheeks flushed at the thought of Chess.

I was so focused on her face that I walked straight into the shadow man that had stopped in his tracks. I felt myself falling backward and braced my hands for the impact. A hand wrapped around my wrist and pulled me hard against a warm body.

My shoulders tensed as my skin crawled where the shadow man touched me. He may have taken on a pretty face, but no amount of magic could cover the vengeful essence lying beneath his skin. The very feel of him pressed close to me made me sick to my stomach.

“Are you all right?” He tipped my head back, concern in his eyes.

I swallowed the bile that had crept up my throat. A bit breathless I spit out, “Yes, thank you.”

My eyes locked with his, the dark pool of brown drawing me in. I could hear the whispers in my head again, but this time they froze me in place. I couldn’t move or speak as I watched in horror as his face lowered down to mine. My eyes screamed for him to stop. For my face to move away. To do anything.

“Excuse me! This is no time for kissing,” Alice piped in, causing the shadow man’s eyes to tear away from mine, and with his concentration broken I was free.

I jerked out of his embrace, my eyes wide as I took several steps away from him. I had become too complacent with his presence. His aloof personality distracted me from the fact that he was Fae, and not just one Fae, but hundreds of vengeful souls merged into one being.

“Don’t do that again.” My voice was hard as my eyes burned with the heat of my rage.

He smirked at my words, then tipped his head back and laughed. “Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“Yes. I can.”

I pushed past him, my legs threatening to fall out from beneath me. Under my mask of rage was fear. A heart-stopping terror I couldn’t let him see, because if he knew how afraid of him I actually was, I’d lose all my leverage.

“I said you couldn’t trust them,” Alice called out from behind me. “None of them. Every single one of the Fae are in it for themselves and would turn on you in a heartbeat.”

“Is that what happened to you?” I kept my eyes forward as I felt the shadow man’s presence against my back.

“I loved coming to Wonderland. The talking flowers, the rhyming animals sipping tea while Hatter sang fantastical songs about nonsensical things.” Alice’s voice became dreamlike as she reminisced. “And the handsome Fae prince was always so nice to me.”

I ignored the fact that she had called it Wonderland. I was sure Alice knew she was wrong. “So what happened? You just up and decided one day this world was more appealing than ours?”

“Of course not. I’m not some delusional idiot.” She glared at me. “I knew for all the beauty and fun to be had there was always a price.” She eyed the man who was quiet as he trailed behind us only motioning which way every once in a while when we came to a junction. “Nothing and no one are what they seem here, and you can’t trust your eyes or your ears.” She eyed the shadow man. “Even for a pretty face.”

“You’ve got that right.” I snorted. I’d had my fair share of attractive Fae, and while appealing they may be, they still had their own agenda that had nothing to do with my well-being. “What happened then to make you change your mind?”

“I fell in love, what else?” Her lips curled up in a bitter smile. “He was my neighbor back home. He was so sweet to me, always wanting to hear about my adventures in Wonderland, unlike my parents who thought I was making it up. I thought he loved me.”

“I had planned on coming back to Wonderland, I mean the Underground, to say goodbye because I had found my reason to stay. But...”

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. "It was a lie. He didn't love me." Her blonde hair whipped around her as she shook her head. "He was just like everyone else. He was only nice to me for the stupid book he was writing."

"The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland." I frowned, remembering something. "But when I mentioned the book before you seemed surprised?"

"Because he promised he wouldn't publish it, not after I..." She stopped and covered her mouth as a sob forced its way out.

"After you what?" I urged, but she soon was caught up in her sobs.

"Go ahead. Tell her," the shadow man finally spoke up, taunting her from behind us. "Tell her how you tortured him for days on end. Tell her how you changed your shape at will to the most hideous creatures imaginable. Until he was so afraid he wouldn't dare close his eyes for fear of waking to you standing over his bed, waiting to start it all over again."

My eyes widened at his words. Was she so heartbroken she would resort to such extreme measures? I'd never fallen in love. I couldn't pretend to understand what she was going through. If this was the result of love, I wasn't sure I ever wanted to be a part of it.

Alice turned her tear-filled eyes toward him, her despair turning to anger. "You have no right to judge me! I pretended to be her so it would look like he was cheating, because you said it would make her admit her feelings. But you lied."

The shadow man held his hands up and shrugged. "What can I say? Like you said, I'm Fae, and we are only in it for ourselves. Though, I had thought she would simply break the marriage off." He stroked his chin and then his lips curved up into a smile. "Killing herself was just a bonus."

My hands balled into fists at the smug grin on his face. The pieces were falling into place, and the picture it was painting was a grim one. How could anyone find their happy ending in this place when everyone was against you?

"I think it's time to go." I placed a hand on Alice's shoulder. My eyes locked on the monster before me. "No more stories. No more games. Where's the exit?"

He returned my glare with a growl. "You try our patience, human. But a promise is a promise." He turned the corner next to us and gestured to the wall. "Here is your exit."

I glanced around the corner to see the mirror he was pointing at. It was identical to the ones I had seen in the Seelie Court, glyphs along the frame

and all. I reached a hand out to trace them with my finger and started when they came to life beneath my touch.

“You’ve always had the ability,” he answered my question before I could ask it. “And now you have your exit. Take the pretender and leave this place.” I didn’t glance behind me as I ushered Alice through, but the shadow man caught my hand before I could follow. I narrowed my eyes at the hand holding mine. “I expect you to return to fulfill your part of the deal.”

“I will.” I jerked my hand out of his grasp. “Unlike you I don’t go back on my word.”

“Don’t make me wait too long, or I’ll come after you.” He eyed me up and down, making my skin crawl with his gaze. “You won’t like the result.”

“What’s taking so long?” Alice called out to me from the other side of the mirror.

“I’m coming.” I responded as I backed into the mirror. My eyes never left his face as the cool liquid engulfed me.



Chapter 19

Veil Of The Faeries

TRYING TO EXIT the mirror backward was as easy as trying to walk in five-inch heels – neither poised nor graceful, and I always ended up on my ass. So I wasn't entirely surprised when I fell out of the mirror and landed hard on the dirt. Didn't mean it didn't hurt all the same.

"Fuck." My hands had tried to catch me, but instead, I ended up scraping them against the ground, leaving dirt and little rocks encrusted in my palms.

"Well, aren't you graceful," Alice's snarky voice pointed out the obvious.

Looking up from my stinging hands, I searched out Alice who was seated neatly upon a rock formation. Her face was contorted in disgust, and a wary fear filled her eyes as her gaze darted around. I couldn't blame her. The mirror's destination was creepy as hell.

Dead grass and dirt patches pitted the ground. There was more rock than plants, and though there were trees and bushes, they were bare and twisted like they had been struck by lightning. It was as if all the life had been sucked out of the place, leaving nothing but a deserted wasteland.

"You really should have been more specific when you asked for an exit." Alice frowned. "Not that I'm complaining, mind you. I'm happy to be free, but this place has always given me the willies."

"Where are we?" I dusted myself off and moved to stand next to her.

She stood from her perch and swept out her arms to the area around us. "Welcome to the Veil of the Faeries. Where all your nightmares can and will come true."

Veil of the Faeries, huh. To me it was less like a veil and more like a graveyard, but who was I to critique someone else's décor? If I had to get through here to get home, then there really wasn't anything I could do about it.

"Well, I'm going to be going now." Alice clapped her hands together in finality. "Thanks for getting me out. Bye."

I grabbed onto the hand waving at me before she could poof away.

“What do you think you are doing? Unhand me,” she cried out, struggling to pull her arm away, but I held tight. She wasn’t going to get away that easily.

“I believe we had a deal.” I held my hand out expectantly. My eyes narrowed when she glared down at my open palm. “Come on, hand it over.”

She reached under the neck of her dress with a growl and jerked the key out from her bodice. When she fingered the key, making no motion to remove it from her neck, I tightened my grip until she winced. Finally, she huffed, ripped the ribbon over her head, and dropped it into my open palm.

The moment the brass key touched my hand I closed it with a snap. Still holding onto Alice, I glanced around us trying to decide where to go from here. I needed to get to the orchard, but I had no idea where that was from here. If only I had a map of some kind. Then again, I peeked back to Alice who was getting ready to dig the nails of her other hand into the one I had on her.

“I’ll make you a deal,” I announced, causing her to stop before she assaulted my hand.

“Another one?” She tilted her head to the side. Curiosity filled her face for a moment but then closed down. Her blonde locks whipped around her as she shook her head. “No. I’m done making deals with you. I just want to find somewhere I won’t be recognized. I don’t want to get thrown back in that cell after I just got out.”

“Look.” I sighed. “I don’t really have a choice. I have no idea where I am or how to get to the orchard from here.” I gestured to the dead terrain. “I need a little direction is all and then you can go crawl into a hole for all I care.”

“Honestly? That’s all?” She frowned, not really believing my words.

“Yes. Cross my heart and all that jazz.” I crossed the hand holding the key across my chest.

“What?”

“Never mind.” Obviously, my pop culture references would be lost on someone locked up for over a century. “Do we have a deal or what?”

“Fine. Go that way.” She pointed down a worn path directly in front of the mirror. “And you will hit the palace. The orchard is on the other side, but you’ll have to go through the Queen’s gardens to get there.”

I stared down the path she had pointed to. There was a weird light along the path, even though the night sky was void of any kind of moon. I

shivered at the ominous presence coming from the direction of the palace. Did I really want to go it alone?

Before I could make my decision, Alice dug her nails into my hand. The sharp pain caused me to cry out and lose my grip, which the blonde used to release herself from my grasp. Rubbing her wrist, she backed away from me with a glare.

“Don’t lose that key. I’ll be wanting it back,” she informed me before disappearing with a snap of her fingers. The sound radiated out into the darkness.

I looped the ribbon of the key around my neck, and made my way down the path, keeping a wary eye on the shadows in between the trees. Something made Alice afraid of this place. With each step I took, I was beginning to understand.

I could feel eyes boring into me like an itch along my skin. I jumped when a branch near me snapped. My eyes darted to the sound as I searched around in the dim light for the culprit.

Finding nothing, I quickened my pace along the path. My feet moved even faster as more branches and twigs snapped beneath what sounded like little feet. Giggles echoed out in the dark at my rising fear.

I stumbled as a buzzing noise flew by, giving a vicious tug on my hair. I spun around, but nothing was behind me. There was more snickering, and then there was another yank on my hair from behind me.

“Argh!” I stomped my foot. I heard tiny peals of laughter at my display of emotion. Someone was playing with me. I really didn’t want to play any more bullshit games. Thought they were funny, did they? I’d show them funny.

I could be fucking hilarious.

I tensed myself for another attack, and the moment I felt a light weight on my hair, my hand swung out. I hit something solid. Yes!

My feet fell out from under me before I could do a victory dance. I glared at the cackling darkness when I crashed to my hands and knees. My already scrapped hands stung as I scanned the area for my attacker. I searched the air around me for what I hit before landing on a small moving figure on the ground.

Not more than four inches tall was a walking stick. No. Not a walking stick, a faerie. Its skin was brown and grey like the bark of a tree. Its wings thin skeletal spines with barely enough skin covering them to fly.

I inched closer to get a better look at it. Its arms and legs were as skinny as its torso, which wasn't much bigger than my pinky. Its fingers were bone thin as were its toes, and its scowling face was as thin as the rest of it. It had long, black wiry hair and no clothes or any distinguishing gender parts. Razor-sharp teeth snarled at me, and its big black eyes bore a hole into my face.

I stuck a finger out toward it, and it gnashed its sharp little teeth at me. I jerked my hand back with a girlish eep, causing the winged creature to snicker.

Growling at my own cowardice, my hand shot out and snatched the little shit up. It waved its fists in alarm, its voice a high-pitched noise as it yelled profanities at me in a language I didn't understand. I brought her, him, whatever it was, up to my face and snarled back.

"I don't know what your problem is, but you and your little friends..." I glowered at the twittering coming from the branches. Their little bodies and black shiny eyes became visible now that I knew what I was looking for. "Need to knock it the fuck off. I have enough Fae riding my ass. I don't need you little twigs adding to it."

I tried to toss the faerie down, but my little speech had pissed it off, and it latched itself onto my hand. I shook it with an impatient growl and then yelped when the little bastard bit me. It smiled up at me with its teeth still locked into my hand.

"Let go, you nasty little faerie!" I grabbed onto its body with my other hand and tried to dislodge it. "Who knows what kind of diseases you have!"

I fell back on my butt when it let go of my hand with a sudden pop. I turned to chastise it for biting me, but the words died on my lips as it licked its chops, smacking them as if I tasted like a double decker chocolate cake with whip cream frosting.

I couldn't taste that good, could I? I'd never tasted my own blood with much thought before. Chess had said I tasted old when we kissed. It definitely wasn't chocolate cake worthy. It must have found something it liked because the faerie leaped into the air with a small battle cry.

It would have been cute if it hadn't been a signal for a whole horde of faeries to come popping out of the surrounding shadows. There had to be at least 100 little brownish-colored creatures, each almost identical to the one who'd bit me, hovering just above their hiding spots. The only distinguishing feature between them was the length of their hair. Some had

long hair like the offending nit, while others had short. The gender of the creatures was still a mystery.

They watched me with hungry eyes as the first faerie hovered a bit away from where I sat. The horde seemed to be waiting for some kind of sign. I wasn't sure I wanted to be around when the signal was called.

"Hey, come on now." I gave a nervous chuckle. "There's no need for violence." I searched around me, desperate for some way out of the faerie horde's focus. Where was a mirror when you needed it? Or a big can of bug spray?

I watched as the one who'd attacked me rattled on in its nonsensical language to the gathering faeries. The rise in its voice and the vigorous gestures of its hands was not foretelling a good ending for me. I had to get out of here before I became as dead as the terrain around me.

While the faerie inspired its fellow Fae, I inched into a crouched position. My eyes darted to those around me for any telling sign of attack. As the speech reached its crescendo, I took off in a knee-jerking run.

I didn't look back as the faeries cried out in alarm, or when I heard the rattling of their wings beating together as they chased after me. A few caught up to me, pulling my hair and nipping at any exposed skin they could.

I put my hands up, swatting at them as my legs began to ache from over exertion. Though I hadn't run far, my body was telling me it was at its limit. I really did need to join a gym. If not to stay in shape, then so situations like this didn't come up again. Then again, when was I ever going to be chased by a horde of faeries again?

Hopefully never.

I could feel myself slowing down as more of the faeries crowded around me. They bit and pulled at my arms and legs as they tried to knock me to the ground. The thing that got me, though, wasn't my exhausted legs or the nasty winged Fae, but a rock. A fucking rock hidden in the shadows.

When I fell, I fell hard. My knees hit the ground in an explosion of pain that rocketed up my back. The moment I was on the ground the horde came upon me. The weight of them kept me from being able to turn over to fight them off. All I could do was curl into a ball and try to protect as much of myself as possible.

Shit. Their teeth hurt. It felt like millions of tiny needles being jabbed into me at the same time, taking bits of me here and there. They were going

to kill me, and there was nothing I could do about it. No Mop and Trip to talk their way out of it. No Chess to pop in and out again. Not even the UnSeelie Prince to save me.

Hell, I'd take Alice or even the shadow man at this point. Some kind of Fae intervention. Anything to make it stop.

Then it hit me.

I was Fae. Well partly. I could make it stop.

I stopped the satyrs, didn't I? I didn't even know I was Fae then. I wasn't a helpless damsel in distress who needed saving. Being part Fae had to mean something, didn't it? I had to have some kind of power, besides going between worlds. Otherwise why would the shadows want me to join them?

As I began to believe in myself, in my own ability to save myself, I could feel something rising up in me. The need to save myself. To make the faeries stop. It pressed against my insides trying to get out. It reminded me of the magic in my little fantasy about the prince. It pushed itself to the limits of my essence, and then all of a sudden, like a dam breaking, it rushed out of me, tearing a scream from my throat.

Tiny winged Fae were thrown across the dark, hitting the ground and trees with a thud. Though it hurt to do so, the moment the weight let up, I tried to move my body. My eyes peeked out to prepare for a counter attack, but the faerie didn't try again. The ones who weren't knocked out kept a wary distance as if afraid of my power and me.

Power. *My* power. I didn't know how I made it happen. If it was because I was under duress or because I wanted it to happen, either way I was getting out of here.

I grimaced as I pulled myself to a standing position. The bites were bleeding, my blood dripped onto the ground and my clothes. I glared into the grey veil; the watching faeries flinched when my gaze passed over them. Satisfied they wouldn't attack me again, I began to limp down the path toward the palace.

With the faeries at my back, it didn't take long to get to the end of the path and the beginning of another hedge maze. I plopped down onto the ground with a groan. Not another obstacle.

I was tired, sore, and hurt. I wanted to go home. Lick my wounds. Change clothes at least. Not fight my way through something else. Glancing

down at the tiny wounds on my body, I decided to inspect the worst of the damage before trying my hand at the new area.

It wasn't as bad as I thought. There were mostly scratches and shallow bites here and there. Some deeper than others. They must have been trying to taste more than maim. It was good for me, but still a little disconcerting.

Would they come after me again?

I was pulled away from inventorying myself when rustling from the hedges made me tense. No more. There was no way I could endure another fight so soon.

As I prepared for another attack, I hoped my new power would come when called, but I sagged when a familiar brown and white face popped out from around the corner.

“What have ye done to yerself now?”



Chapter 20

Painting The Roses Red

I TRIED TO make my face contrite as Mop patched me up, but I didn't have the energy. Maybe it was the blood loss, or maybe I just didn't give two shits about what anyone thought anymore. It was probably a little bit of both. I did try to listen to Trip as he told me what happened to them after I was arrested.

"Trip wanted to stay and rescue Lady, Trip did!" Trip grabbed my arm, causing me to groan as he tried to make me understand. "But Smiling Cat showed up and said we'd get in trouble if the queen caught us too. Said we should leave it all to him, so Trip and Mop went back to the Smiling Cat's house, though, Mop complained an awful lot, Mop did."

I gave the opalaught a weak smile and patted him between the ears. "It's all right. I would have done the same. If you'd gotten caught as well then who would have been there to tell Chess to rescue me?"

"Fat lot of good that did." Mop growled, shoving his bandages back into a small pouch at his waist. "Look at the state ye be in! Tore to pieces by them faeries, ye hair's a complete wreck, and where be that damn cat?" He waved his arms around. "Nowhere. Just like always. Not worth a lick, that's what he be. I told ye." He shook his finger at me. "I told ye he couldn' be trusted."

I waved him off with a hand as I moved to stand up. "It wasn't entirely his fault. He got me out of the Seelie Court, but where he went afterward I don't know. He never made it through the mirror. The rest..." I gestured at my hair and bandaged arms. "Is a series of consequences made from my own decisions. You can't fault him for that."

"But the Smiling Cat promised." Trip's face became serious, his tail rigid behind him. "And when Fae makes a promise, they have to fulfill it. Smiling Cat did not keep Lady safe like he promised, no Smiling Cat did not." He shook his head, and his eyebrows scrunched together at the cat's betrayal.

"I be tellin' ye before, when are ye going to learn?" Mop chastised Trip. "His word don' mean nothin'. That cat doesn't play by our rules,

never has.”

“Because he’s a half-breed, right?” I intercepted.

The brownie raised a curious brow at me. “How’d ye find out bout all that?”

“I haven’t just been getting myself in trouble, you know. I’ve figured some things out along the way.” I rolled my eyes as I stepped over a root poking out beneath a hedge.

“Oh, yea?” Mop sounded surprised that I had been able to untangle some of the mysteries of the Fae world all on my own.

“You bet. I even got the key from Alice.” I pulled the red ribbon out from between my breasts to show them.

“Shh!” Mop hushed me, glancing around with wide eyes. “Have I taught ye nothing? Don’t say her name!”

“Might as well get over it, because I let her out.” I gave a smug grin, and then grimaced when a particularly deep bite began to protest from all my moving around.

“Ye did what?” Mop covered his mouth at the loudness of his voice, once again searching for some unseen eavesdropper. He lowered his voice to a whisper and hissed, “Why’d ye go and do that fer?”

“Because it was the right thing to do.” I placed my hands on my hips, daring him to argue. “Besides, it was the only way I could get the key from her. Though, dealing with the shadows was not something I had anticipated.”

“The shadows!” Trip cried out, his fur sticking up as his eyes darted around.

“That what happened to ye hair? Ye be makin’ deals with those monsters?” Mop growled at me.

“That was actually a misunderstanding I took care—” Mop grabbed my arm and jerked me back before I went around the next corner. “What?”

“Shh!” He put a finger to his mouth. “Listen.”

I glared down at the brownie but did as he said. I angled my head to hear whatever had caused the pair to clam up. A voice. It was humming a sad and depressing tune, barely heard above the sound of water falling. The mixture of music with the sound of the water caused my mind to flashback to the satyrs.

My pulse raced and panic flooded my senses. Not again. I couldn’t do it again. I was already going to be in therapy for the rest of my life. I’d

break if I had to fight more of them off. I wasn't strong enough. I needed to get out. I needed to-

Mop tightened his grip on my arm when I tried to bolt. I glowered down at him, giving a violent jerk on my arm.

"Let go. I need to go. I won't deal with them again. Not if I can avoid it."

"Calm down, ye ninny. It's just the queen. This be her garden we be walkin' through." He reminded me, his eyes looking beyond the corner toward the sound of the humming.

"The queen? But we're in the UnSeelie Court, why would she be over here?" I kept my voice to a dull whisper.

"This is our queen." Trip's ears perked up to hear her song.

"The UnSeelie Queen? You mean Ma-" I caught myself before I could say her name. Wouldn't do to give away too much of what I'd learned. "You mean the prince's mother?"

Trip nodded his head, his face eager to see his queen.

"Why does she sound so sad?" I was curious to see Mab, the tall, black beauty I'd seen in my vision in person. What would cause such a fierce woman to sound as if the love of her life had died?

Mop scoffed, giving me an impatient look over his shoulder. "You'd be upset too if you hadn't seen your only child in over a century."

I angled my head to see around the corner, my eyes searching for the face that went with the song. What I found instead was a garden of outstanding beauty. I stifled a gasp as my eyes took in the rows and rows of flowers of all shapes and colors. I recognized only a few, and the rest were ones I'd never seen before.

I liked flowers as much as the next girl. Though, I'd rather have a book over a bouquet any day, I could appreciate the magnitude of what I was seeing.

The flowers were arranged so they made a circular pattern along a stone path. At the center of the circle was a large, marble statue depicting an image of Adam and Eve beneath the Tree of Life, but instead of a serpent hanging down from the tree as in most depictions of the story, there was another woman peeking around the base of the trunk.

What was a garden this beautiful doing in the UnSeelie Court? Wasn't it more of the Seelie Queen's style? And why did the Tree of Life appear eerily like the tree from my vision?

“Are you going to stand there all night?” A voice from behind the statue asked, and then I noticed the humming had stopped.

I glanced down at Trip and Mop for some guidance. They shrugged their shoulders. Well, they were a lot of help. I inched out from behind the hedge and made my way along the garden path.

When I came upon the woman whose voice had called out, her beauty once again stunned me. The vision did not do her justice. Her hair cascaded down her back in waves of inky silk, which blended into the black of her gossamer gown. The gown hung off her shoulders, exposing her pale, white shoulders to the moonless night. Her long fingers held the stem of a white rose, the tips of its petals bled into red.

“I have heard a lot of about you, Katherine.”

I watched as she bent her ear down to the flowers as if listening to their whispers. So this is where the flowers reported. It’s no wonder she knew my name already.

“Not all bad I hope.” I tried to joke, but clamped my mouth shut when she turned her gaze to me. The sadness in her song was gone and had been replaced with a condescending tone.

“You have been a busy, busy little human.” She stepped toward me, taking my chin in her hand to examine me as her son had done. “Breaking so many rules in so little time.”

“But I can—”

“I am talking,” she snapped, cutting me off. The commanding sound sent a chill down my spine. For all her beauty, she wasn’t someone to be trifled with.

I clamped my mouth shut at her steely gaze.

“Not signing in. Piggybacking on into our world on someone else’s key. Trampling all over that gruesome talking head’s insides. Causing havoc at the Hatter’s. Even crashing my dear cousin’s precious party.” She gave a dark chuckle. “In short, you have caused quite a stir in the Underground.”

I opened my mouth to apologize but stopped. I had nothing to apologize for. I never meant to end up in their world, let alone cause so much strife. My initial curiosity had landed me in the Underground, but since then I had tried my best to play by the rules, ever changing as they may be.

“Do not misunderstand.” Mab smirked at my solemn expression. “I find it all delightful news. My cousin has made life stifling with all of her

rules. ‘Do not say this. Do not do that.’” Her voice mimicked the White Queen. “It was high time for a change.”

Her personality flip-flops were giving me whiplash. One moment she was cool and indifferent, the next she was a hot blaze of anger, and then she was happy as a clam. It made me wonder how much of the UnSeelie Prince’s personality was inherited from his mother and how much was because of the spell?

“I’m glad I could cause you some amusement,” I said, eyeing the dark queen for any signs of displeasure.

“The thing that makes your appearance in our world all the more fascinating,” she continued as if I’d never spoke. “Is not the reaction from the Underground, but from that of my son.”

Her gaze misted over at the mention of the UnSeelie Prince. “I myself have not seen or heard from my dear boy, but my flowers.” She caressed the pelts that gave a sort of sigh. “They keep me up to date of his comings and goings. They had some interesting words to say about you too.”

“He should have alerted the guard the moment you stepped foot in the Underground, but for some reason he did not.” Her dark blue eyes surveyed me. “Why do you think that is?”

“How should I know?” I shrugged my shoulders.

I had no clue why he would do such a thing. He had no problem threatening Mop and Trip, and while he had threatened me as well, it was more of a playful poking than an actual real threat. The prince was as much a mystery to me as he was to his mother.

“He planted these for her, you know.” Her long, red-painted fingers stroked the petals of the roses before her.

“Who did?”

“They were supposed to be a wedding gift, but well.” She sighed, snapping the rose at its stem. “You know how that turned out.”

I gave an awkward cough, not sure what she wanted me to say. Instead, I focused on the roses. “They are an unusual color. I’ve never seen a rose with white and red petals before.”

“No, I cannot imagine you have.” She gave a small sad smile. “They used to be as white as a newborn Opalaught’s coat, but after that horrid incident, they began to bleed red. They’ve stayed that way for the last century or so, but for some reason,” she held the rose out for me to examine, twirling it around between her fingertips. “They have begun to

turn white again. Very curious, is it not?" Her eyes twinkled as her lips curved up in a peculiar smile.

I licked my dry lips. "Yes, very curious."

"Here, take it." She held the rose out to me. I stared down at the rose and then up to her eyes, which seemed to be searching for some kind of reaction.

"Oh no." I shook my head. "I couldn't."

Mab's eyes hardened, the curve of her lips pressed into a thin line. "Would you deny a gift from the Queen's garden, the garden you are currently trespassing on?"

I gulped. Well, when she put it that way, I couldn't refuse. I reached a hand out to grasp the stem in my hand, but the moment I touched it, a sharp sting caused me to drop it. Of course it had thorns. I should have known better.

"I'm sorry." I gave a quick apology as I reached down to pick it up. Before I could pick it up, the queen's lace-covered shoe stepped out and crushed the rose beneath her foot. I gave a wary glance up to the queen.

"Speak no more of it. There are plenty more. You must be more careful." She took my hand in hers, examining the blood swelling from the prick. "Blood like yours should not be wasted."

I had a feeling I knew what she was going to do, but before I could take my hand back, she pressed her mouth to the wound and licked the blood from my skin. I watched her face as it contorted between disgust, surprise, and then a knowing smirk.

"Well now, that is interesting." Her inquiry was more to herself than directed at me.

"What?" She wasn't the first one to find my blood appealing. Could she tell I was part Fae? Did she know I was human? Or did she find out something different altogether?

"Nothing of importance." Mab waved a hand, dismissing me. "Now get out of my gardens before I call the guards."

"But—" I started, but found Mop and Trip at my side in an instant, leading me back out of the garden. As I let myself be dragged away, my eyes darted back to the queen, who'd turned her eyes back to the roses before her. Something had transpired here, and even though I had been present, I was lacking the knowledge of knowing what it was.

"And, Katherine."

I paused at the exit. “Yes?”

Without turning to me, she spoke, “We will meet again. Have no doubt.”

My brow furrowed at her cryptic statement. Before I could inquire further, Mop and Trip pulled me into the maze and out of sight. Curious indeed.



Chapter 21

The Orchard

THE HEDGE MAZE wasn't as much of a maze as an entryway into the orchard. Thankfully, it was nothing compared to the headache I endured before encountering the satyrs. A few more turns and I found myself standing at the entrance of what was without a doubt the orchard.

My confusion over Mab's final confounding words was pushed aside as I was drawn into the reality of where I was actually standing. The orchard. It had been a hard and mystifying trip, but I was finally going home.

The orchard was exactly what it sounded like, an orchard. Though, I'd never been to one back home, it was the same as most were in books and movies. There were a dozen or more rows of trees, all with different colored fruit. At the moment, there was nobody to harvest them. Actually, there was nobody around at all.

A light breeze blew my hair across my face. The majority of it was still white and I wondered briefly how I was going to explain that change, let alone my eye color. Would it change back on its own, or was I stuck with it for the rest of my life?

"The door's this way." Mop waved me over toward a stone wall that wrapped around the orchard, caging it in.

"Mop?"

"Hmm?" He moved along a path, which circled the trees. There were wheelbarrows and baskets sitting alongside the wall as if workers would come back any moment. For all I knew they would.

"I was wondering about my hair and eyes."

"Yea, what about them?" He didn't look at me as he answered.

"Well, am I stuck like this, or what?" I gestured to my hair, growling at his nonchalant attitude.

"Nah, the affects don't last. As long as you don't be lettin' anymore Fae feed on you that is. Ye should be back to normal after a few days." He paused and then shrugged his shoulders. "Probably."

“Probably?” Mop sped his pace up, ignoring my question. “Wait. Mop? What do you mean probably?”

“Trip likes Lady’s hair.”

I glanced down at my long-eared friend and smiled. He always knew what to say to make me feel better. I’d miss him when I got home.

It felt like I had spent a lifetime in the Underground. What did my grandmother’s house even look like? What did my bed feel like? Did anyone miss me? Would there be cops waiting at my doorstep with my overly dramatic mother crying about her socially awkward daughter’s quick hang up? It was hard to guess what would be waiting for me.

More than likely no one had noticed. Everything would be the way it was and work would be there in the morning. It was half tempting to stay in the Underground just for the lack of enthusiasm I had for the human world in general.

“Are ye comin’ or not?” Mop snapped his fingers at me, pulling my focus to the little brown Fae. “Time’s a wastin’, and I’d rather not spend my best years lollygaggin’ with ye.”

“Impatient to get rid of me, huh?” I smirked as he shuffled his feet. If his skin had been lighter I’d swear he blushed.

“Well now, I wouldn’t say that. I’ve grown kind of used to ye.” He scratched the back of his head. “Don’t ye wanna go home?”

I thought about it for a moment. Did I want to go home? Not really. What was there for me? No real job. No boyfriend. My family, I could admit, I would miss no matter how out of place I was in the family pictures.

“I don’t know to be honest.”

“Lady could stay.” Trip tugged on my hand. “Lady could stay with Trip. Trip would let Lady sleep in Trip’s bed.”

I laughed at the excitement in his eyes. “Oh really? Then where would you sleep?”

Trip opened and closed his mouth as he thought about it. I giggled at the dumbfounded scrunch of his brow. Guess I wasn’t staying with Trip.

“It’s all right.” I patted him between the ears. “I really should go home. But you guys could always come visit. You have to deliver my biscuits to Teeth for me, remember?”

“Or ye could do it.”

My eyes snapped to Mop. “But wouldn’t you guys get in trouble? I mean, look at all the trouble it took to get me to this point.”

“Yea but ye have the faerie key now.” He pointed to the key around my neck, causing me to hold it up to examine it.

“What about it? I have to give it back, don’t I? I mean, it does belong to Alice.” I waited for Mop’s usual chastising growl, but it didn’t come. Instead, he shrugged his shoulders not at all worried about my slip.

“Not unless ye be wantin’ to, and that there key don’t have no time limit like the rest of them. It was stolen from the reception desk the first time the girl was here.”

I clasped the key in my hand. It made me feel better to know I could come back. It made leaving so much easier, yet I still didn’t want to go.

“Trip doesn’t want Lady to leave. Trip will miss Lady.” Furry white arms wrapped around my legs, and his ears and tail drooped.

I held my hands up not wanting to touch the opalaught. If I did, I knew I’d start crying. I really didn’t want that to happen. If there’s one thing I hate more than crying women it is when I cry. I’m not a pretty crier. I get all splotchy and puffy, a runny nose, and then I’d start wailing. It was not an attractive picture.

Seeing my dilemma, Mop placed a hand on Trip’s shoulder, easing the opalaught away from me. “Come on, Trip. Let’s go back to the tea party. Hare will be wantin’ to know how everything went. And Hatter should be back by now.”

Trip’s sad eyes filled with eagerness at the thought of seeing his cousin again. The very thought of going back to Hatter’s gave me a headache. That was one place I wouldn’t miss.

I mouthed a thank you to Mop who nodded his head.

“Ye take care of ye self, and we’ll see ye again after everything dies down on this side.”

I gave a curt nod. “I will and thank you for everything.”

I watched as my two companions that I hadn’t known for long, but had become endeared to me, made their way back down the orchard’s path. My eyes followed them until they disappeared beyond the trees, and I could no longer delay what I had to do. What I needed to do.

I turned back to the door before me. It was identical to the one I had entered back in the Between. It had the same texture to the wood, the same brass doorknob; even the scars in the wood were the same.

I supposed it would only make sense for me to come out the same place I went in. Meaning, I would have to go through the Between again

and meet that horrid two-headed bird. Gripe and Type.

Great.

I gripped the key in my hand and poised it to insert into the keyhole. The urge to stay roared in me even as the key touched the hole. Though, before I could slide it home, the key jerked from my hand and into the brush a few feet away.

I glanced between the door and where the key landed. The feeling that was urging me to stay changed to an urgent need to go to it. My feet moved on their own, and with each step closer to the key, the need increased until I found myself before the brush. I bent down, searching between the branches. I could see the key glinting in the dark. I reached my hand out to grab it, the brass key just out of my reach.

Just a bit further.

I got down on my hands and knees and inched my way into the brush. I pushed the branches away from my face, the leaves pressing against my arms as if urging me forward. With each inch into the foliage, the key seemed to be further and further away. Then, when I glanced back, I could no longer see the orchard. The branches had closed behind me, blocking out any chance of going back.

Something or someone wanted me to come this way. I could still feel the tugging on my stomach, telling me I had to keep moving. There was something waiting for me. What it was, I had no idea, but I knew deep inside it was important. A piece of me was missing and I needed to get it back.

The bushes seemed to go on forever. The further I pushed my way through the more there were. I was about to give up hope of ever getting the key, despite my intense need, when I happened to glance to the left and see a wooden sign. The majority of it was covered by a bush and was overgrown with vines. I ripped the vines away to uncover the wood beneath.

It had seen better days. The wood was worn and decayed, and there were grooves along the edges from where animals had gnawed on it. In the dim light, I could barely make out the faded words etched into the wood's surface.

'Enter at Your Head's Risk.'

Well, that wasn't ominous at all. I peeked back at the closed over path. I didn't really have a choice; I'd already come this far. If I did get caught

and ended up back in the Shadow's Between...well, hopefully, the shadow man would be there to rescue me. I shook my head and laughed at the thought of the shadows saving anyone. It sounded crazy even by Fae standards.

Passing the sign, I crawled further into the tunnel of bushes. As I progressed further, my eyes locked onto the key in front of me, the small opening I had to move through seemed to expand up and out, until I was able to stand up from the ground. There were fewer branches now and stone walls peeked out from between where one bush ended and another began. The heels of my boots made a click-clacking noise as the ground faded from dirt to stone floors.

Though I hadn't seen anyone move the key, or an invisible force picking it up, the key was always a few feet ahead of me. I was beginning to wish I had taken Trip up on his offer to stay with him when my game of cat and mouse ended. I found the key right at my feet.

I bent down, my hand slow to reach out and take the key for fear of it moving again. My shoulders relaxed when the cool metal of the key pressed into my hand when I wrapped my fingers around it.

Finally.

Standing up, I looped the key around my neck as my eyes took in my new surroundings. The stone walls were bare of any green life forms, and they wrapped up and around the area. A hoot from my right jerked my eyes to my missing feathered friend. What was he doing here? I stared up at the ceiling where the stone curved up into a dome.

How did he get here? I glanced back to Mr. Blue Eyes and noticed the familiar large stones he was perched on. I had a feeling I had been here before.

"I didn't mean to. I didn't know what would happen." Alice's voice echoed in my mind as my eyes searched out the tree I knew would be there.

Staring up at the tree, it was not as huge as I had believed from my perch in the daydream. The tree was actually not much bigger than a one-story house. The large roots poking up from the ground were disproportionate to the height of the tree, as if they had grown out on their own accord. There was one thing about the tree that was the same.

The fruit.

Unlike in the dream where there was an abundance of fruit, a lone glowing fruit hung from one of the branches. The peach-like shape made

the fruit resemble a glowing ball of light and it beckoned me forward.

My eyes stayed on the fruit as I once again found my feet moving on their own. The closer I got to the tree, though, the more I found myself drawn to something else in the roots. The need that had begun to settle in my belly flared to life.

There was something there. I remembered something. Something from the vision or maybe a memory? But how was that possible? I'd never physically been here before, had I?

I stretched my hand out, taking one step after another, each step becoming more urgent than the last. I fell to my knees, both of my hands spread out across the rough surface of the tree's roots. The magic inside me, which had not surfaced since the veil, began to raise its head, seeking out something that lay beneath the tree's base.

A body.

It was there, beneath the wood and stone, but hollow. An empty shell forever stuck in time. It was no use to my magic now. It couldn't fill the empty hole inside me. The one I somehow had always known was there but could never fill.

I sat back onto the ground, leaning back against the base of the tree, my eyes wandering to Mr. Blue Eyes who was watching my every movement. He tilted his head to the side, eyeing me as if to ask 'What are you going to do now?'

I wish I knew.

The magic in me was still simmering on the surface, waiting to be released. To where though? There wasn't anyone attacking me. I didn't have a clue what I was capable of let alone what I could do to dispel the magic that had built up in me.

My eyes swept away from the owl and across the rock-filled area before landing back on the lone glowing fruit I had bypassed earlier. Why was there only one? In the vision I had there were so many more on the tree. Had someone taken them? The tree did seem a bit more worn than before.

My magic tingled along my skin as I thought about the glowing fruit. My hand came up and beckoned the fruit forward. At first nothing happened. I furrowed my brow and coaxed the energy from below my skin to do as I bid.

Mr. Blue Eyes squawked an alarming cry when the fruit wiggled on its stem. Fighting the temptation to look at him, I kept my eyes on the fruit and willed it to me. It jerked in place as I stood to my feet. Gaining more confidence from my new stance, I gave a sharp cry of surprise when the fruit hurled itself toward me and into the hand I had held up to protect my face.

Well, at least I knew that worked.

“Pretty cool, huh?” I glanced over at the white-speckled owl. He huffed and shuffled his feathers as if to say to me ‘big deal.’

“Screw you too, buddy,” I growled, turning my back on him with the fruit in my hand.

It was a big deal to me. Magic was something I still hadn’t fully accepted yet, let alone the idea of me doing magic. I smirked at the fruit in my hand. I could move objects with my mind.

I felt a bit giddy at the idea. Even more so because of the floating feeling that began to inch up my skin from where I was holding the glowing peach-like fruit. I turned it over in my hand and held it up to my face as I searched out the source of the light coming from inside it.

This was the fruit that granted Alice her powers and killed the Seelie Princess?

Like most things in the Underground, I had to be cautious until proven otherwise. Could the fruit grant my wish? Probably. Would it be exactly what I wanted? Not fucking likely.

Still, part of me whispered, what could it hurt? I couldn’t go back the way I came, even if I had the key to get home. Home. That one word made the decision for me. I wanted to go home and this fruit could get me there.

Ignoring the warning bells going off in the recesses of my brain saying it was a bad idea, I brought the fruit to my mouth. Mr. Blue Eyes must have agreed because as my teeth sank into the skin of the fruit, and its juices flowed into my mouth, he began to squawk and hoot in vigor. As I swallowed the tangy flavor down, my head began to swim.

The magic of the fruit poured into me, making me drunk on power. I tried to focus on the thought of going home and my grandmother’s house. The vegetable patch in the backyard and the lines of flowers all along the front lawn, but the images just wouldn’t come. The only coherent thought in my mind was the word home.

I focused on that one word. Home. I willed the fruit's magic to take me home. To where I belonged. Of course, it wasn't a clear enough request, but it was the best I could do under the circumstances. It wasn't like I had any other home to go to.

I waited for the energy in me to do something. Transport me somewhere. When nothing happened, I peeked my eyes open and saw I was still in the closed-off grove. I began to think it wasn't going to do anything at all.

Then the images began.

A blonde-haired Fae, with a much kinder face than when I'd seen her in the ballroom, smirked at me as she teased. "You want to see him, don't you?"

See who?

"I don't care if you can't stand him. You have a duty to your kingdom." The White Queen's voice growled through my head, her icy blue eyes breaking through Gab's face.

"I'll never leave you."

My body enveloped with warmth at the words. A feeling of overwhelming love and devotion filled me as the UnSeelie Prince's face swam into view. Before I could register where the feeling was coming from more images poured in. Places I'd never been, thoughts and words I'd never spoken, and a deep gut-wrenching feeling of betrayal.

It was too much at once. My head was overloaded, and I knew I was going down even as a pair of arms caught me. The warm body holding onto mine barely registered, but the dark blue eyes broke through, and one word slipped from my mouth.

"Dorian."



Chapter 22

Home Again

IT HAD BEEN raining that night. As cliché as it was, the Underground only had one rainy season. It lasted exactly one week and was there one minute and gone the next.

It was one of those days that I loved the most. I'd sit beneath one of the many fruit trees with Dorian as we talked about the future and what it held for us. Sometimes we'd feed each other the fallen fruit. The best times were when we'd just sit and hold each other. I loved the way he wrapped his arms around me and hold me tight. I'd breathe him in and forget everything else in the world. Even now my body yearned for his arms around me.

He'd been waiting for me in the orchard. We had a long standing date to meet on the second day of the rainfall. But I'd been running late that day, and when I got to our tree, someone else was already in those arms. The blonde human girl who had been popping in and out of the Underground since she was a little girl was holding on to my Dorian.

I had never really met her. She had always chosen to hang around the UnSeelie Court for Reaper knows what reason, so I didn't know her enough to give her a second thought.

But when I saw her there with Dorian, with her hands tangled in my dark prince's midnight tresses, and her petite form pressed against his as her mouth tasted what was once mine, I was overwhelmed with emotion.

Anger and hate filled me for the girl named Alice. In the same instance, I was filled with sadness and devastation for the man I thought loved me. And then pity and self-loathing overshadowed any other feeling. Why should I think I could be happy? To have love?

I was a fool.

No longer able to stand watching my life crumble before my eyes, I ran. My slipper-covered feet splashed in the puddles, soaking me to the bone. My hair matted to my face as the rain pelted down on me, but I didn't care. Nothing mattered anymore, and I only had one thought on my mind.

I wanted to get away. I wanted it all to stop. The pain. The pressure that pushed down on me and threatened to rip me apart. I wanted to die, but taking one's own life was hard when you were a Fae. Near impossible.

Iron was the only real sure way to kill us, and the Fae didn't leave it lying around just anywhere. I'd have to go to the human world to get some. I was on my way to the door when it called to me. The same, now familiar oakly voice that had plagued me for over a year.

When I happened upon the tree I didn't question what it was, the betrayal and heartache overrode my senses. I was too mesmerized by its fruit as it cooed to me like a new mother, welcoming me into its bosom.

I remembered biting into the fruit and the sweet liquid pouring into my mouth as I thought of my pain and the need for it to stop. But after that, nothing. There was nothing up until my earliest memory of my childhood as Katherine.

But that wasn't really my name, was it?

Remembering wasn't hard. It was all too easy to remember the life I had before. The person I was before. A person that had begun to creep out since the moment I was sucked into the rabbit hole.

I knew the human in me didn't like the person I was. The cool and calculating Fae who never wanted to fall in love, and when she finally let her walls down, her heart was obliterated. The human in me much preferred the awkward English Lit major who couldn't find a real job or a boyfriend. At least she was kind. At least she had choices.

Lynne.

That was my name. A name I hadn't heard in over a century. A name I had hoped to never hear uttered again. Not that anyone, save my mother, would remember it.

Except Dorian.

He remembered. I knew because as my consciousness floated back up, that was all I could hear. A deep silky voice that urged me to wake up. The voice of the man who I'd loved as a Fae. The man that even as a human, I still found myself drawn to.

I fought to keep my eyes closed, torn between wanting to see him, and dreading it. The last time I'd seen him as a Fae was with *her*. Alice. The feelings I expected to surface, the ones I had been running from, didn't appear. They were still there, just beneath the rampant pounding of my heart, but it was like it had happened to someone else.

In a way it had.

I wasn't the Seelie Princess. I was human. My body still felt the same. The aches and scrapes from my battles to get home still wracked my mortal form. If I could get through the Underground with all of its wonders and horrors as a mere mortal, I could certainly look my ex-fiancé in the eye.

The moment I shifted in place the hand holding mine tightened, and Dorian's voice became louder and more urgent.

"Lynne? Can you hear me? Are you all right?"

My eyes peeked open to meet the concerned dark blue of the UnSeelie Prince's eyes. The markings on his face were still there, but unusually inactive. My mother didn't forgive easily, and only the reappearance of her only child would make her willing to remove a curse once cast, which meant my mother must have been notified of my return.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

I eased up in the bed I was lying in, pulling my hand away from his to cradle my head. My world had become tilted and my stomach lurched at the aching in my head. Apparently shoving a lifetime's worth of memories back into your head was not something to be taken lightly.

"Lynne? Talk to me, please. Are you all right? How did this happen? Why do you still look like the human?"

I avoided looking at him, instead taking in my surroundings. I was in the room from the mirror, well my room. My breakfast table was still there, but the tea set and writing pad were gone. My vanity still stood next to a full-length mirror, but this time instead of looking out to Mop's and Trip's concerned faces, only my own looked back. My eyes lingered over the image of Dorian sitting next to me on the bed. His lips were still moving as he plied me with questions that only made my head pound harder.

Was I okay? No. How'd it happen? Magic, duh. Could I explain it more than that? No fucking way.

The last question, though I could kind of answer. Why did I still look like Kat? Well, because I was still her, or well me. And while my human body was limited, it was a far cry better than my Fae form. It was a dead and useless carcass that could easily be discarded. The stupid tree had at least done that right. When I had wished to die, I didn't know I needed specific instructions on what to do with my soul afterward. Who knew how long that tree held onto it before it shoved me into a human body?

“Lynne!” Dorian grabbed my shoulders, turning me to him and yelling out to a waiting servant when I didn’t show any plans of responding. “Somebody call a healer!”

“Stop yelling. Geez. I’m fine.” I smacked his hands away from me and stumbled from the bed.

“You are certainly not fine.” He came up beside me, catching me before I face planted into the dresser. “You cannot even keep your feet under you.”

“Yes, I can. It’s just these damn...” I trailed off as I noticed I wasn’t wearing boots. In fact, I wasn’t wearing any of the clothes Chess gave me. Not that I was complaining, they were risqué for my tastes, Fae or human, but the silky white night gown I was wearing wasn’t any better.

“One of the servants changed you,” Dorian provided, leading me to sit back on the bed. “That human girl made a wreck of your clothes.”

“I’m still that human girl, you know.” I jerked my arm out of his and scooted away from him. “There’s just more to me now.”

I turned my face away from him and stared at my reflection in the mirror. My eyes had turned completely blue, and there wasn’t a speck of red on my head. So much for going back to the way things were.

Dorian sat down next to me. As usual, his presence caused a tingle to buzz along my skin. “But how is this possible?”

He really wasn’t going to give up, was he?

“Hell if I know.” I sighed, throwing my hands up in the air.

The prince tried to inch closer to me to take my hands again, but when I tensed, he stood and turned away from me to face the window. Dorian didn’t say anything for a while; his eyes stared out the window, giving me a chance to scan his profile from behind.

Seeing with Fae eyes was different than seeing with human eyes. I didn’t just see him as a whole delicious package. Sure my eyes were drawn to the way his pants fit his backside, but whose wouldn’t be? We never had an issue with being attracted to each other. The taut muscles in his shoulders, though told another story.

“I tried to find you afterward.” His voice was tight as if he were trying to control his emotions.

I kept silent as he spoke. I knew we would have this conversation eventually; I just didn’t think it would be right away. Right now. I wasn’t

even sure what was going to happen in the next five minutes let alone what to do about what happened in the past.

“The moment I figured out it was a trick. That Alice had...” he paused, caught up in his anger. He turned to me his jaw tight. “But you had already done it.”

I couldn’t meet his eyes as they bore into me. I tried to wrap my arms around myself to shield me from his accusatory glare. He knelt down before me, grabbing ahold of my hands. My eyes jerked to his as his voice melted from angry to desperate.

“Why, Lynne? Why did you not let me explain?” He dropped my hands and grabbed my shoulders, his emotions becoming more intense as I sat in silence. “I would have never cheated on you with another, especially not a human. I thought you knew that.”

His hands tightened on my shoulders. My eyes hardened as he spat out human as if the mere word were repulsive. He kept forgetting, I was still human.

My eyes hardened and I scowled at him. “In the Seelie Court emotions are only weapons that can be used against us. You know this, and still you ask why.”

My voice became quiet as I tried to retain my anger. “If you’d asked me back then why I did it, I wouldn’t be able to tell you, because I honestly didn’t know what I was feeling. Seeing you with her caused all reasoning to go out the window. I couldn’t see the bigger picture. I couldn’t think this isn’t something my Dorian would do. All I could see was her hands on you and you...you kissing her.”

His face and hands softened at my admission. “And now?”

My eyes burned at the hope in his eyes. He thought we could go back to the way we were before. Like we could just pick up where we left off. That everything would be all right again.

“I...” I sighed. This was hard. Harder than I thought it would be, yet easier in so many ways.

“Dorian,” I started again. It felt weird to say his name out loud. I didn’t know this person. Not really. “You have to understand. The Lynne that you knew, the one you loved, isn’t me.”

“What do you mean? Of course you are.” He tried to grab my hands again, but I moved them before he could. Touching would not make this any easier on either of us.

“I’m not Lynne. I’m Kat.” I scratched the back of my head and looked up at the ceiling. “I mean, I have all of Lynne’s memories. All of her feelings for you.” I peeked up at him. My heart ached at the forlorn expression in his eyes. “But it’s like its secondhand knowledge, like it didn’t even happen to me. So you see.” I gave an awkward chuckle. “You’re virtually a stranger to me. I think it would be awkward, if not inappropriate, for us to go back to the way it was before.”

“I see.” Dorian stood up. The face that had been so open and full of hope had locked down into an expressionless mask. “If that is how you feel then there is nothing that can be done.”

The part in my heart that was Lynne wanted to run after him. But it was like she was submerged in water and could barely be heard above my own feelings. Those feelings were telling me to keep my distance. I didn’t know these people. I didn’t know what they would do when they found out I couldn’t be the Fae Princess they wanted me to be. So I sat there and watched as he moved toward the bedroom door, his shoulders stiff as he opened it.

“I will leave you to get settled. Your mother should be here any moment. Please feel free to call if you need anything.” He glanced over his shoulder, his eyes hard and cold. “I am sure you can at least manage that.”

The door slammed behind him, the sound resonating through the room. Had I been too blunt? Should I have lied and pretended everything was okay?

I shook my head to clear my doubtful thoughts. No. I did the right thing. It wouldn’t have been right to lie.

“Well, that didn’t go very well.”

“Chess!” My head jerked to the mirror where the pink-haired feline was poking his head out.

Chess gave me a fanged grin as he stepped out of the mirror, the heels of his plum-colored boots sinking into the plush carpet. Gone was the golden outfit and back was his violet-and pink-colored ensemble. Only this time, I wasn’t so distracted by the extravagant belts at his waist.

“So this is the palace? It looks so ordinary. Hmm.” His tail picked up a bobble from the vanity and passed it to his hands as he chuckled. “Goes to show you, you can’t judge a fish by the hook in its mouth. Look at you for instance.”

He moved away from the vanity and approached my scantily clad form. I itched to move my arms over myself, but I knew from previous experience that would just encourage him. He leaned in until our faces were inches apart as his tail wrapped around my waist.

Chess picked up a piece of my blonde hair and brought it to his face. I could feel his breath against my cheek as he watched me. Unable to stop it, my face filled with heat at the intensity of the emotion in his eyes.

"If I'd known you were royalty, I wouldn't have teased you so much." He pressed my hair to his mouth. His voice became low and husky. "You'll forgive me won't you, your highness."

I tugged my hair from his claws, blushing harder as I muttered, "Yeah right, like being royalty would have stopped you."

Chess shrugged, placing his hands on my waist to pull me closer. "Probably not, but I'd have been more diplomatic about it."

"At least you haven't changed." I chuckled and then frowned remembering Dorian's retreating back.

"They are going to expect things from you. Things you might not be prepared for." He placed a claw under my chin, tipping my face up to his before letting me go with a shrug. "Well, what's a princess to do?"

"Do?" I took a step back from him when his tail released me to trail along my arms. "About what?"

"Your marriage of course!" His words and voice proclaimed his excitement, but I'd come to know the telltale signs of agitation by the way his tail and ears twitched in jerky movements. He wasn't all that happy with my parentage or my prospect of getting married. Not that I was either, but it was nice to know someone else was still on my side.

"I hardly doubt they'll want me to marry him after they figure out I'm not all Fae." I shook my head, not needing to explain who he was to Chess. "Besides, I like being human. I remember what it was like being the princess, and I don't think I could go back to being her. At least not be the princess again and stay sane."

"A rose is still a rose even hidden under different petals. I doubt they'll care if you want to be a dandelion. They'll still try and make you a rose." A far-off look filled his eyes. "Take it from someone who knows. You're a tool for their use. Nothing more."

A tool? Was that all I was? I knew my mother wanted to stop the shadows. It was the whole reason behind the marriage, well part of the

reason. My heart ached thinking back to Dorian's expression as he slammed the door. But even without Dorian, I'd known what my mother had wanted, and I agreed to do it like a good dutiful daughter. But not this time.

Chess was right. If I stayed they'd want me to change. To be more Fae than human. To spend the rest of my life, as short as a mortal's life was, hiding my emotions. Then there was all the bowing and the etiquette, the never having a moment to myself, and always having to be on guard. Even when I was with Dorian. Especially when I was with Dorian.

I could never really let myself go, even in the rare moments of passion we'd shared. If I chose to marry Dorian, it would mean I would have to give up my human life. I would have to stay in the Underground and be their princess, and some day, when my mother retired, their queen.

I wasn't ready for that kind of commitment. The very thought of eternity caused panic to fill my chest. I couldn't marry Dorian. I was only 22 for Christ's sake. I had my whole life ahead of me. I wanted to be reckless and flounder for a few more years. Then, when I was pushing thirty, I'd buckle down and make a definite life decision.

There was also the question of my family. What to do about them? Should I at least stay and meet with my mother after all these years? I'm sure she had missed me even if her face would never say so. She had a permanent look of cool indifference whenever she was in front of the Seelie Court.

Oh, the Seelie Court. I had left so many people behind there. Would they be happy to see me? Even when they realized the girl they had teased in the ballroom was their friend? Gab would be happy no doubt, but the others were harder to guess. Fae friends were hard to come by and even harder to keep. Not like the human world.

And what of my human friends? Would they quickly forget me when I never showed up to work? And my human mother? We never got along, and she was always criticizing my choices, but she was still my mom. Not to forget the rest of my family. I couldn't do to them what I had done to those in the Underground.

While it had been over a century for the Underground, it was like yesterday for me. I didn't know how I was supposed to answer their questions. I had no doubt they would be like Dorian – desperate to understand – and I wouldn't be able to give them more than I had given him. Soon they would realize I wasn't the princess they had mourned all

these years. I wasn't even sure who I was, not really. But I knew who I wasn't. I wasn't a princess, Fae or not.

"So, my lovely, what are you going to be? A rose or a dandelion?" He held his hand out to me, the offer as obvious as the nose on my face.

He could take me home. Get me out of here before they forced me into a choice I didn't make. Even in my state of panic, I could tell he really wanted me to take his hand. To choose the human world over the Fae, and maybe even a part of him that was too afraid to admit it, wanted me to choose him over the courts.

But could I do it?

Before my mind had been completely made up, my hand slid into his. As I stepped through the mirror, I didn't think about what I was leaving behind, but rather what I was returning to. Maybe, just maybe, even where I truly belonged.

The End



CHASING CATS



Chapter 1

Home Again

HE WAS STARING again. Lately, every time I looked up Mr. Blue Eyes was sitting in the tree outside my kitchen window.

As my constant shadow in the Underground, I was shocked to say the least, to find out my feathered friend was indeed my fiancé. I knew the UnSeelie Prince had the ability to change form, but it kind of left me peeved to know that he had been following me around the Underground.

The bright blue eyes had darkened to Dorian's usual midnight blue and were set in a feathered head that cocked to the side when it saw me looking. I frowned; even in owl form Dorian still exuded arrogance and overall disdain for the human world. His presence was becoming a regular unwelcome occurrence for me.

I wasn't surprised. Had I really thought I could slip out of the Underground without anyone noticing? I knew there would be repercussions, but at the time all I could think about was getting home to my world—well, the human world. Chess' outstretched hand had been a Godsend and the easiest alternative to the pressure that had been weighing on me.

I hadn't been home from the Underground for more than a day when my feathered keeper showed up. He never tried approached me, not like I thought he would.

Back in the Underground, he'd been so determined to make me see how sorry he was, how much he wanted to start things up again. Even though his constant watching was on the creepy side, it was a relief that was all he was doing.

Luckily, my Fae mother, Tatiana, Queen of the Seelie Court and the main Fae I was avoiding, hadn't reactivated the curse on Dorian in light of my disappearing act. I was sure his mother had some say in the matter as well.

Mab, the UnSeelie Queen, like her son, tended to have a temper. I doubted she would let her precious baby boy be blamed for my human

flakiness. They probably thought Dorian was their best chance at getting me to come home.

Not that he has tried.

“Back again, I see. He doesn’t seem to get the hint, does he?” I jumped in place at the sound of Chess’ voice purring right beside my ear.

“Don’t do that!” I spun around and smacked him with a dishtowel as he chuckled. My angry face threatened to fall when I took in the sight of him.

Half Seelie, half UnSeelie, Chess was nothing like the Cheshire cat from the classic fairy tale. His pale pink hair was loose around his broad shoulders. His muscular chest was covered with a cream-colored, cotton sleeveless shirt that left his biceps bare and flexing. The faint scars that crisscrossed over his upper body barely peeked out from the slight split in the neck of the collar. A corded braid was wrapped around his neck and hung loosely down his chest. It brushed the top of his fitted rose-colored pants, where his stripped tail was wrapped around his waist. His usual knee-high boots were swapped out for a pair of brown ankle boots.

I fought the smile that threatened to creep up my face when his purple and pink striped ears twitched on his head while he smirked down at me.

“I’m serious. What if someone had been here? They could have seen you. Then how would I explain that? Oh hi, mom, this is my friend Chess. He’s a cat Fae from another world. What’s a Fae you ask? Well, they are magical creatures that could kill you in an instant, but don’t worry, the only thing in danger is your underpants. Yeah, that will go over well.” I rolled my eyes.

“Oh, don’t worry so much, pet. You’ll get wrinkles.” He rubbed his clawed finger between my scrunched up brows.

I didn’t want to be distracted, so I shrugged his hand away and turned back to the sink and the dishes in it. You’d think that as the Seelie Princess I wouldn’t have to do my own chores, but since I was in deep denial of that responsibility, lowly domestic tasks like dishes had to be done.

“Don’t tell me you aren’t happy to see me?” Chess pouted in a too cute tone that made my insides melt.

Cheshire S. Cat knew just how attractive he was and didn’t need to know how his very presence caused a fire to ignite in me. I was in an ongoing battle with my libido since meeting the Fae, but I hadn’t lost yet, even if the Fae could tell how I was feeling by my smell alone.

As if reading my mind, Chess pressed his nose to my hair and inhaled, growling slightly. Damn those Fae senses.

“You’re so responsive. I’ve barely touched you, and you already smell so tantalizing.”

I shivered against his breath on my neck.

“I can’t wait to find out how you’ll react to all my ministrations.” His chuckle was dark and invited naughty thoughts to play in my mind. His tail unwrapped from his waist and slid across the skin between my green polo shirt and jeans.

His hands replaced his tail, pulling my back flush against his front. I slammed the pot I had been cleaning down into the sink harder than I meant. I tried to focus on the sink full of dishes and not the tingling of my skin or the pooling of my nether regions.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” I was proud that I was able to speak without my voice shaking, let alone being able to sound snappy. “An Underground to moderate. Payments to defile?”

I winced when the last part came out bitter. Jealous? Who, me?

Chess’ hands stilled on my waist, and he stepped back from me to hop up on the counter next to the sink. He leaned back on one hand until he was able to meet my eyes. I kept my gaze down so he couldn’t see the emotions flipping through them. He brushed a piece of my pale blonde hair behind my ear, the color a daily reminder that my time in the Underground wasn’t a dream. Not that the memories of my life as a Fae Princess would let that be a possibility.

When I had been sucked into that rabbit hole, I hadn’t expected to come out alive, let alone with a new hairdo and a whole new set of baggage. Lucky for me, it wasn’t unusual for someone to change their hair color so drastically. Also, the fact that my human mother had a cow when she found out I had colored my red hair blonde was the only good thing to have come of it. If only my Fae life was so easily managed.

“Jealousy becomes you, your highness. I especially love it when you show your claws,” he said. I snorted, not falling victim to his game. He continued after a moment, “Besides, there’s nothing to moderate. The queens are on speaking terms again, and all is right in the Underground. There’s no need for dear old Chess anymore.”

I frowned at the resentment in his voice. It wasn’t the first time the feline had hinted at his dissatisfaction toward the Fae Courts and their

rulers. It made me wonder what happened between them to make him hold such disdain.

My eyes strayed to his scars, and I asked the one question I'd been dying to ask since we met, "How did these happen?"

I reached out a finger to trace along one peeking out from his shirt.

He caught my hand in his and brought it up to his mouth to nip at my fingers. "It happened a very long time ago, before I had the position of moderator to protect me."

"Protect you? From what?" His mouth on my hand was distracting me enough to make my voice come out low and breathy, but not enough for me to give up my curiosity.

"If you are so concerned for my wellbeing, I could give you a thorough look at my person to satisfy your curiosity." He pulled my top half forward with a tug of my hand until we were inches from each other. "That is, as long as I get equal payment in return."

"Payment?" I muttered, my eyes entirely too focused on his tempting lips rather than his words, or that he was deflecting my questions again.

His mouth coasted over mine, a ghost of a whisper, his words hot against my lips.

"Yes, a complete examination will be required in return." He slid down from the counter to press his length against me. My breath hitched when my hands landed on his chest, the feel of him hard beneath my palms. "But I must warn you, I will be vigorous in my search."

I gulped at his words as his clawed hand tilted my face up. I knew he was going to kiss me, and part of me tried to remember why it was a bad idea when his lips descended onto mine. Before I could sink into the kiss, something slammed behind me. I jumped and pulled back. Chess smirked, and I followed his gaze to where Dorian stood in his entire UnSeelie splendor.

His inky black hair fell over his equally dark silk shirt. Had he always dressed like a Goth? How did I not notice that before? His pants were only a slight shade dimmer than his shirt; if you could get darker than blackest black, and were tucked into shiny, leather knee-high boots. The Fae may have some modern amenities, but some of their clothing still screamed otherworldly. My fiancé was no exception.

"Get away from her, half-breed." The sound of his voice was sharp but held forbidden promises.

I felt Chess tense beside me before his usual fang tipped grin slid over his face. “Your highness, what brings you here? Aren’t you supposed to be guarding something?”

My breath held for the reaction I knew would come at Chess’ goading. Short tempered and impatient had always been Dorian’s worst traits. In some ways, the curse had been good for him.

Dorian needed to learn to regulate his temper, as I had often told him. I would have thought that having such a restriction on his emotions would cause some of his control to be better, but it didn’t seem like it—if the tightening of his jaw was any indication.

He had been blamed for my Fae body’s suicide in the most torturous of fashions. Forced into exile from the UnSeelie Court, he was tasked to watch the outskirts to keep out the human riff-raff. To my mother, being exiled wasn’t enough. She’d branded his beautiful aristocratic face with a curse, forcing him to be happy about his punishment, though most of the time it had come out more creepy than happy. He hadn’t been able to mourn my death or have any other emotional releases. It really was no wonder he was so uptight.

He glared at Chess and then stormed across the room in a cloud of fury. I stepped forward, placing myself between the two before they could start anything.

Dorian glanced down at me before snarling at Chess, “You would do well to remember your place, half-breed.”

“Chess,” I retorted. Dorian’s burning gaze landed on me, but I didn’t shy away. “His name isn’t half-breed—it’s Chess. And it was a perfectly logical question. What are you doing here?”

Dorian opened his mouth to respond and then snapped it closed, his lips twisting into a frown. “You know very well why I am here.”

“Actually, no. I don’t.” Crossing my hands over my chest, I leveled my eyes at him and tapped my foot. I could practically feel Chess crowing in glee behind me and was half tempted to let them have at it. It would at least be entertaining for me, and if they were shirtless, hot as hell.

His dark eyes looked over my head as he growled, “You are not safe on your own here. I am here for your protect—”

I snorted, cutting him off. “More like to spy for the courts.”

Growing tired of the conversation, I moved away from both Fae to finish the dishes, which at this rate, weren’t going to be done until

Christmas. Why did the dishwasher have to break today?

“I am not spying for the courts,” Dorian continued as if I hadn’t dismissed him altogether. “We are simply not confident in the human realms ability to keep you safe.”

“And that has nothing to do with them wanting you to convince Kat to come home?” Chess asked. “Tell me, your highness, are you here for your court or hers? Who holds your leash now that you are no longer bound to the outskirts?”

The dish in my hand paused, suspended mid-air, as I waited for his answer. I didn’t know why I cared so much. I didn’t love him. I couldn’t. Not like he wanted me to, anyway.

“No one holds my leash, Cheshire.” The way he said the name was filled with so much venom, I could feel the sting of it on my skin. “I am here for Lynne’s safety and no other reason.”

“Kat,” I bit out.

“What?” Dorian barked at me.

I could feel my magic building inside me, morphing my anger into rage. He still didn’t get it. My hands gripped the counter until my knuckles turned white. I just wanted him to understand. I wasn’t her. I mean, I was, but I wasn’t. It was all very complicated, and I always gave myself a headache when thinking too hard on it.

“What did you say, Lynne?”

The moment he said that name again, the magic in me broke loose. Every dish in the house flew from their places in the cabinets. They crashed to the ground in a symphony of glass. Pots and pans clanged and dented as they were thrown across the room.

“Kat?” Chess’ voice filled my ears, and I unclenched my hands from the counter. A heaviness I hadn’t known I felt was suddenly lighter than before.

Turning from the counter, I surveyed the destruction I had caused in my little outburst. The entire kitchen was trashed. Not only had all the dishes been damaged, but also everything from the refrigerator had been spilled onto the floor. Leftover spaghetti lay in a goopy red mess on the tiles mixed with the jar of pickles I always kept handy. Now, what was I going to eat at four in the morning?

The two Fae stood in the middle of the room, concern filling their faces.

I gave an aggravated sigh and waved them off with a, “I’m fine,” before I bent to start picking up my mess.

“You’re wound too tightly, my kitty Kat.” Chess chuckled, even as Dorian sent him a scathing glare. “You have magic now. You can’t neglect it, or it will find a way to get loose.”

“Well, as much as I despise saying it, the cat is right,” Dorian said with a huff. “Though, I do not understand how this has happened.” That made two of us. “The fact of the matter is, your magic is returning to you, and I have little doubt it will stop there.”

“What do you mean?” I paused on the floor where I was making a pile of dishes.

“Though you reside in a human body, I believe your other Fae abilities may materialize, and you must be prepared for it.”

I glanced over at Chess who was helping put some of the broken glass into a pile. He gave me a solemn nod to confirm Dorian’s words. I didn’t know why I trusted Chess’ word over Dorian’s; he hadn’t been any more honest with me. In fact, I didn’t know anything about him, and he didn’t exist in the memories I had from when I was the Seelie Princess.

“Why don’t I remember Chess from before?” I didn’t want to have the headache causing talk about my new powers and what they could mean to my human life.

Dorian crossed his arms over his broad chest, his eyes alighting with mirth. “I would not imagine you would. He was not born during your time, Lynne.”

My right eye twitched at the name again, but I chose to ignore it in lieu of getting answers. “But why –” To my irritation, Dorian cut me off.

“Which brings me to the other reason I am here.” He turned back to the cat in question. “You have been summoned to the Seelie Court. Since no one has been able to locate you, and I had no doubt that you would show back up here eventually, I volunteered as messenger.”

“What can I say? I’m a sucker for a beautiful woman.” Chess gave me a fanged grin, the heat in his eyes more for Dorian’s benefit than my own.

Anger pulsed off Dorian in waves, making his hair move as if there was a breeze, but I knew from my own experience with magic, there wasn’t.

“You will keep your hands off Lynne. She does not belong to you.” His words sliced the air like a knife in my lungs.

Chess smirked. “She doesn’t belong to you either, your highness. What I do, or do not do, is all up to her.” He winked at me, and I flushed. God, he was a flirt. But Dorian didn’t see the humor in his words.

“Lynne is mine!” His voice vibrated through the room, and the picture frames fell from their places on the wall.

I was done. So done. Monumentally done.

I grabbed the closest pan to me and stood to my feet, waving it like a weapon in the air. “Stop calling me that! I am not yours. I am far from yours. I’m Kat. Kat. Got that?”

His eyes widened as I jabbed the pan at him. A wince filled his face at every jab. Was he always such a wimp? It’s not like it was a knife or something it was just a pan...an iron pan that was turning molten hot in my grip!

“Motherfucker.” I dropped the pan, howling, my injured hand held out in front of me.

Every inch of the skin that had been in contact with the pan turned a nasty shade of red. Angry blisters appeared on my palm, threatening to pop at any moment.

“I knew this would happen.” Dorian sighed and tried to reach out to grab my wrist, but Chess beat him to it.

“I’ll handle this.” Chess gave me a small, reassuring smile before he narrowed his gaze at Dorian. “Don’t you have somewhere to be, your highness?”

Every time Chess said the honorific, it always had a slight condescending quality to it. I was surprised Dorian let him get away with it. He was never one to let someone act above their station, especially a half-breed.

Crossing his arms over his chest, his silken shirt pulled tight across his muscles, Dorian returned Chess’ look with an equally haughty one. “Not as of this moment, but you do, half—” He cut off at my warning frown. “Cheshire and you better not keep your Queen waiting.”

Chess’ jaw tightened as did his grip on me. “She is not my queen, any more than she is yours.”

“Be that as it may, at one time, she was all of our queen, and unless you would like a reminder, I would suggest you make haste. I can take care of Katherine,” he said, giving me a pointed look, like I should praise him for remembering to use the correct name, “as I always have.”

Chess made a sound of disagreement before turning to me. “I won’t be gone long, and if you need anything...” His green eyes locked onto Dorian. “If you need anything at all, just call.”

I pushed him away with my good hand. “Go. Go. Don’t keep my mother waiting. I’ll be fine.”

Chess gave me one last cursory glance before turning on his heel and disappearing into thin air. I stared down at my injured appendage with a wince. My hand hurt, my kitchen was a mess, and I was utterly alone with the last person in this, or any realm, I wanted to talk to. Great.



Chapter 2

The Talk

“COME.” DORIAN GESTURED for me to have a seat at the table.

I eyed the chair, shuffling from one foot to the other. While my hand hurt like hell, I really had no inclination to sit down and hash out our issues, which I was sure he would try to do.

“You know...” I cleared my throat. “I’m fine, really. I just need to get the first aid kit out of the bathroom, and I’ll be right as rain. There’s no need for you to hang around.”

His eyes narrowed at my obvious attempt to get rid of him. “Nonsense. I am here. There is no reason you should endure on your own.”

“Really, Dorian. I’m fine. I just need—”

“Katherine. While I understand your need for independence, your measly human medicine will not suffice to heal such a Fae-related injury, and unless you want it to spread, which it will no doubt do if not treated properly, I suggest you—how do you say—suck it up.”

If the thought of the blisters spreading wasn’t enough of a determining factor, the sharp tone in his voice told me I was wasting my time trying to argue with him.

I threw my good hand up in the air with an exasperated sigh. “Fine.”

“Good. Now, sit.” With a twist of his wrist, a container with some kind of beige crème in it appeared.

I dropped into the chair at the kitchen table with a huff. So much for avoiding the awkward conversation he would no doubt try to start. What was I going to say? What was he going to say? You’d think having my memories back would make things easier, but it didn’t. Not really. I had a hard time explaining it to myself, let alone to someone else. Especially someone who wanted the girl I used to be to be real.

“I cannot treat your hand if you do not give it to me.” The laughter in Dorian’s voice was not lost on me. At least one of us thought this situation was funny.

I hesitated before gingerly holding my hand out to him across the table. It was odd to see the Dark Prince, dressed in his regal attire, sitting in

one of the mismatched kitchen chairs as if it were a throne under his delightful tush. It was hard to believe he was really here in the human world.

“Why do you look at me in such a manner?” He twisted the top of the container; a sharp flowery smell assaulted my senses. Angelica? It was well known in the Fae world to counteract iron poisoning. I had always hated that smell. Wait. Did I?

I shook my head to clear the befuddlement that was my past life and met his bemused sapphire eyes.

“Like what?”

“As if you are plotting my demise.” Dipping his long slender fingers into the container, he then began to spread it across the festering blisters on my palm. The crème felt cool against my burning skin, and I fought against the urge to moan out loud.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” I muttered, blushing even though I hadn’t been thinking anything close to that.

He gave an exasperated sigh, pausing his ministrations.

“I used to be able to read your expressions so well. Now...” he trailed off, the forlorn expression not making his face any less handsome.

“It’s different.”

“Yes. Different.” His voice was soft as his hand resumed stroking mine. This time, it was more for the sake of touching than healing.

I eased my hand out of his, the tension in the room became stifling.

“Thanks,” I mumbled as I stood from the table, needing to get some distance between us.

“Lynne. I mean, Katherine.” He had that look in his eyes that said my luck was out, and he wanted to talk.

“Don’t. Just don’t.” I put my good hand up to stop him as he stood from his seat. His height towered over me, making the room feel smaller.

“We need to talk about this. You cannot go on pretending like I do not exist.” He grabbed my uninjured hand, pulling it to his chest. “Like we never existed.”

His heart beat beneath my palm, and it caused an ache in my own. I’d have laughed if the moment hadn’t been such a serious one. Pretend like he didn’t exist? That wasn’t likely, especially with how he had taken it upon himself to be my shadow. I could no more pretend he wasn’t real than I could stop the memories from stalking me in my dreams.

Since I had come back, there was not a moment when I closed my eyes where my dreams were my own. It had become so bad that I was afraid to fall asleep at night, because I knew what I would see. It was like a hundred years of being suppressed made that part of me need reconfirmation that we were alive. So I was treated to a reel of my life as Lynne over and over again. The good, the bad, and the heart wrenching painful moments that had me jerking awake in the middle of the night. Seeing him like this was almost more than I could bear.

I extracted my hand from him with my heart in my throat.

"I can't." My voice was a helpless whimper that I hated.

"Cannot what?" The pleading in his voice made the whole situation even worse.

"Do this. Us." I turned from him, wrapping my arms around myself, being cautious of my still tender hand.

"But why? Why can you not give us a chance? I know you are not the same woman, but—"

I spun around. "Do you? Because from what I've seen; you don't seem to get it at all. I'm not. I can't be the princess you fell in love with. I'm not her."

"But she is in there somewhere. You have her memories. Her feelings." He placed his hands on my upper arms and pulled me close. "Who is to say you cannot feel the same thing for me?"

I let him hold me close to him. The beat of his heart pounded in my ears. It would be so easy to pretend. To just pick up where Lynne had left off, but it wasn't that simple. Not only was I human, but also I wasn't even sure who I was anymore. What part of me was real? What feelings were mine and which ones were hers?

I swallowed hard and pushed away from him, tears pricking my eyes. "I can't."

"Try, please. For me," he begged. It seemed so wrong to hear those words from him. He was the UnSeelie Prince; he shouldn't be begging anyone, least of all me.

"I think you should go. Don't you have a kingdom to rule?" I quirked my brow, trying to soften the blow. "Your mother must be beside herself with worry. Why aren't you with her?"

Dorian's jaw tightened. "I have not been to see her yet."

"What? Why?" My mouth popped open in surprise.

From the way Mab had acted in the garden, I would have thought she would be the first person he would see once his curse was lifted.

“I did not think she would want to see me.”

I almost laughed until I saw his face. “You’re serious? Why would you think that? Of course she wants to see you!”

Dorian and his mother had the kind of relationship I had always envied. The dark and domineering exterior was just a show for their soft and warm insides. I had never seen any mother love her child as much as Mab did Dorian—unlike my mother, human or Fae, whose exterior was as cold on the inside as out.

This time, he turned from me, hiding his face from my view. “You would not understand. You were not here when they found out what happened. It is—”

“Complicated. Yeah, I know. God, do I know.” I blew out a shaky laugh.

Complicated seemed to define my life right now, and it seemed like I wasn’t the only one.

“I should take my leave.”

He moved toward the door, and before I could stop myself, I called out after him.

“Wait.”

He stopped in his tracks, and I instantly regretted speaking.

“Was this not what you wanted?” The muscles in his back tensed.

I opened my mouth but had no words. I didn’t know why I told him to wait. I had asked him to leave, but knowing he had suffered because of me made the emotions I thought were buried under a thick blanket of stubbornness billow up.

“Are you coming back?”

Coward.

His shoulders bunched up as if surprised by my words. “Do you wish me to?”

Well, that was the million-dollar question. The fact that I couldn’t answer that one question said how screwed up in the head I was. While the Fae part of me still remembered the gut-wrenching feel of his betrayal, the human part of me was solely focused on the memory of Dorian himself. I knew what it felt like to kiss him, to touch him, to be touched by him. It didn’t help that the latest dream had focused on the brooding Fae Prince

with a lot fewer clothes and a lot sweatier goodness. The memory of it was enough to make my insides quiver.

A growl ripped from his throat, and before I even recognized the feeling, his hands were buried in my hair, and my face was yanked up to his.

The first time he had kissed me in my human form was in a memory. My own memory, to be exact. I had fallen through a looking glass in the Seelie Court that was used to view whatever the looker wanted. I had unfortunately been thinking of the UnSeelie Prince, and though I hadn't known it at the time, I ended up in one of my own memories.

But unlike then, where his kiss had been long and lingering; this one was demanding, and almost punishing, yet it held an underlying uncertainty. It was that uncertainty that caused my hand to curl into the front of his shirt and kiss him back. I sank into the kiss even though I knew it was hypocritical. I'd pushed him away over and over with claims of not feeling anything for him, but it was a lie. I felt more for him than I was comfortable with, and that was reason enough to keep him at arm's length.

Nothing good would come from this. I was human. He was a Fae prince. One that didn't really see me: Kat, the human. He only saw Lynne, and it was that part that just wanted to give in to him.

Because it was easy. It was familiar. Even if it was wrong.

With that thought, I pushed him away from me, panting, as I looked anywhere but at him. "Please go."

He stood there, no doubt dumbfounded at my sudden change. "But we —"

"It was a mistake," I cut in. I licked my swollen lips and tried to keep my voice steady. "It won't happen again."

This time, when he grabbed me by the arms, it wasn't gentle. His pinching grip jerked my eyes to his in a smoldering glare.

"I could make you, you know." His eyes glittered with anger. "I could make you love me. You are human now. So weak. So easily manipulated."

His magic pheromones pulsed me. My breath caught and parts of me that had been cooling off flared to life.

The press of his power might have caused a physical reaction, but the anger that flared to life brought my own magic with it. I let it rise to the surface, causing my skin to crackle. His hands loosened before tightening once more, unrelenting against my warning.

“You would not even know the difference,” he bit out through clenched teeth as his magic pushed down on me further, making the room feel like it was losing oxygen by the second.

I surprised myself, because instead of lashing out with my magic, I let it melt away.

Meeting his eyes with a level stare, I said, “Then do it. If that is all that matters to you, do it. I’ll be a mindless puppet, completely at your disposal.”

His expression softened slightly, his grip a little less pinching. I knew he wouldn’t do it. He couldn’t do it. It wouldn’t be real. Not really. I’d been on both ends of Fae pheromones and knew what they could do to a human. Prolonged exposure could ruin them, both mind and body. They wasted away, pining after the Fae that had exposed them. It was one of the reasons why the Fae were forbidden to use their pheromones for anything but dire situations. At least, that was the way it was a hundred years ago.

A throat cleared behind him, interrupting our stare down. “Uh, ye highness?”

Not taking his eyes from me, Dorian answered the voice I couldn’t have been happier to hear, “What is it, troll?”

I frowned at Dorian’s degrading tone. Mop was not a troll. He was a brownie. A short, little cocoa-colored Fae with a dark beard and even darker eyes. His red overalls matched his red hat, and his feet were bare. He had been my constant companion through my recent adventure in the Underground and always seemed to get there in the nick of time. This was one of those times.

“Hello, Mop.” I smiled, stepping around a perturbed Dorian.

“Lady.” He nodded at me, his gaze still on his prince. “Ye highness, I don’t be meanin’ to intrude, but ye mother be askin’ for ye and sent me to relieve ye.”

“Relieve him?” I cast an irritated glance back at Dorian. “Why would you need to relieve him?”

“Uh...” Mop looked to Dorian for an answer, seeming to not want to give away more than the prince had let on.

“So, your highness.” I crossed my arms over my chest and waited. I used his title for the sake of the others in the room. Names have power, and you didn’t want to give the wrong person that kind of power over you. Not

that I didn't trust Mop to keep his mouth shut. It was better safe than sorry. You never knew who could be listening, though.

"It's for your own good." His voice was short and left no room for argument, but I was never one to let that stop me.

"So you've what? Been babysitting me? I'm an adult. I don't need a keeper." I flipped my hair over my shoulder with more flair than required.

"As I can see." He looked me up and down in a salacious enough way that even Chess would have blushed. Mop gave an uncomfortable cough. "But the fact of the matter is, you're the Seelie Princess. The only heir to the Seelie Court and now that you are back, you have to understand that your mother—everyone—is reluctant to let you go again. Especially with Alice on the loose and the shadows gathering forces."

That had my attention. I had only been gone a few days and already things in the Underground were falling apart. Fuck me.



Chapter 3

Falling Apart

THE SHADOWS. IN my time as the Seelie Princess, I had only heard whispers of them. The Fae so monstrous, so corrupted that even the Seelie Queen didn't trust them to be thrown into her mirror prison.

I'd been told the Shadows were exactly that. Shadows of their former selves made from the black abyss they had been exiled to so long ago.

Sheltered as I was before, I had never stepped outside the palace walls, except for the times I snuck out to meet Dorian in the Orchard. It was easy to pretend there wasn't pain and suffering in my kingdom when I didn't have to see it. But as a human that all changed.

The Shadows were no strangers to me. I knew their plea. Their wants and desires. Me being one of those primary ones.

I could still feel their burning touch on my skin. Their promise to give me everything I ever wanted. To make me their queen. I had promised I'd think about it, but when you are facing down pure evil, you will swear just about anything to get away.

"What's happened?" I targeted my question toward Mop and hoped it came across curious and not at all nervous.

Mop glanced at Dorian as if asking for permission.

"Yes, tell her, troll. Tell her how her actions have consequences." His dark eyes narrowed at me. "Rules are rules for a reason. Even for you."

"Pfft. Rules are meant to be broken." I cocked my hip to the side, trying to seem confident and not at all guilty.

"I do not remember you being so cocky before. It must be the human in you." Dorian sneered before he whipped his arm around, transforming into the beautiful barn owl.

"Hey, you better not poop on my floor!" I hollered after him as he swooped through the kitchen and out the open back door.

Marching over to the door, I slammed it shut and locked it for good measure. "Good riddance."

"Ye really shouldn't treat his highness so poorly. Ye don't know what he went through after ye left."

Guilt gnawed at me from Mop's chastising. The thought of causing Dorian pain still made my insides ache and the thought that he was punished because of my irrational thinking made it even worse. I felt bad for the guy, but he still irritated the shit out of me.

"He started it," I pouted with a childish tone.

"Ye don't need to be lettin' him rile ye up. Nothin' more than children, ye are." Mop muttered the last bit to himself before plopping down in a kitchen chair.

"Hey now, I wouldn't say that! And shouldn't you be treating me with reverence and fear? I am royalty, you know." I lifted my chin and gave my best regal expression.

"Bah!" He snorted. "Bein' royalty ain't got nothin' to do with who ye are."

"And who exactly am I?"

"Lady, 'course." He shook his head, the red cap swishing back and forth. "Just cause ye be havin' the soul of the Seelie Princess, don't mean ye're her."

Finally! Someone got it. I could kiss Mop with how happy his words made me, but I wouldn't because that would be weird, and I was limited to how many people were on my side right now.

"Besides," he continued. "I doubt ye have much power considerin' ye be human and all."

"Not true! See all this." I gestured to the mess in the kitchen. "All me, buddy."

"My point exactly. Ye might be havin' the abilities of the princess but ye ain't knowin' how to use 'em." He cringed as he seemed to take in the disaster that was my kitchen for the first time. "Or how to be controlin' em. Ye no better off than one of them younglins."

"Well, then, why don't you teach me?" I was getting tired of being called a child. I was a grown ass woman. Take my breasts for instance. You didn't see fabulous knockers like these on a ten-year-old!

"I've told ye before. I be a lower Fae. I wouldn't be knowin' the first thing 'bout ye powers."

"So what? Don't you have any powers? I don't remember there being that much of a difference between the lower Fae and the higher Fae. Not that my mother dared to let her precious baby girl be exposed to them." I let the bitterness toward the Seelie Queen fill my voice.

It was a wonder I ever made friends at all with how locked down I had been. Not only was I restricted to the palace, but I was only allowed in certain areas. More often than not you would have found me in the gardens. The library and the dining room were the only other rooms I was allowed in, besides my own quarters. I was surprised any of the Fae knew me at all since the Court room was strictly forbidden.

Once I had asked why I wasn't allowed in Court and my mother had returned my question with a condescending laugh. "The Underground is a cruel world, darling. You have to know how to play the game to survive."

She'd gazed down at me as if there was something in me lacking, and for all I knew, there probably was. Not that I would want whatever she deemed worthy of going to Court. Bunch of self-absorbed vultures.

"Now hold ye horses." Mop's irritated growl pulled me from my thoughts. "I didn't say I not be havin' any powers. Just not the kind ye be havin'." He held his hands up in defense.

"Then what are they? And what about Trip? What are his powers?" Trip was the white opalaught that started this whole mess when I had mistaken him for a rabbit. As far as I could tell, his only ability was being able to chew through any garden wire that I threw at him.

"Ye humans, always with the questions. Unfortunately, bein' part Fae hasn't changed that rude habit." Mop glared at me. "Since ye apparently don't remember, askin' someone's powers be like askin' their true name. It be rude, and fights have started over less."

I had the decency to look ashamed. I did remember the rules, but the human half of me didn't have a filter or care as much about them. Though, my diarrhea of a mouth didn't always listen to me.

"Well, if you won't answer that, how about where is Trip?" I searched the room for my white-eared friend as if he was hiding somewhere nearby. "Isn't he usually with you?"

"I be imagin' he be with Hare." His voice sounded less offended now and more distracted. "Hatter be actin' strange the last few days."

I'd never actually talked to Hatter. I'd only seen him once at the Mourning party. The party the Seelie Fae threw in honor of—well, me. As parties went, I wasn't impressed anymore now than I had been then. From what I had seen of Hatter, he hadn't seemed to like being there either. I wouldn't know one way or another if he were acting strangely or not.

“What is considered strange for Hatter? He looked kind of pissed off last time we saw him.” The serious expression on the tall silver-haired Hatter flashed through my mind.

Mop barked out a laugh. “I’d imagine he would be surrounded by all them Seelie. He might look like them, but he ain’t got the patience for their high and mighty outlooks toward the rest of the Fae residence.”

“But he’s high Fae, too, isn’t he?” From what I knew, most high Fae seemed more humanoid and less like animals, unlike the lower Fae. Not that I’d met many. In fact, I was beginning to think I didn’t know a whole lot about my own world.

“Hatter be High Fae, just like ye are, but unlike them, he prefers the company of the Lower Fae. If ye could call that party of lunatics Fae.” He snorted.

Having witnessed their crazed antics, I couldn’t exactly argue.

“So, how is he different now?” I tried to change the subject back.

Mop took his hat off his head and wrung it between his hands. For the first time since Dorian left, Mop looked worried.

“Could be many things,” he muttered to himself as if forgetting I was even there.

“Like?” I pressed, taking a step closer to him.

“Well.” He turned his hat around in his hands, staring down at it with such intensity it was making me worry. “There be all them disappearances as of late, and then there be the rumors.”

“Disappearances? Rumors? What do you mean? What’s happened?” I had a sinking feeling that I knew what he was going to say.

“First, there be Twinkle,” he murmured with his eyes downcast. “Then Door Mouse up and disappeared. No note, no nothin’ and ye know it had to be them Shadows, but no one be certain since no one be seein’ nothin’. It can only mean...”

“What? What does it mean?” I urged him to continue.

He leaned in close to me, lowering his voice so I had to strain to hear him. “Thems Shadows be taken corporeal form.”

I swallowed hard, trying to act surprised. “And that’s bad?”

Mop jumped up from his seat, waving his arms around in the air. “’Course that be bad! Separately, they be just an annoyance. Only a threat to those who don’t be knowin’ the rules. But together?” He visibly shuddered. “Ye don’t want to be knowin’ the havoc they could ensue.”

Oh, I was sure I could imagine it since I was there when it happened. I remembered what it was like to be at the mercy of the horde of lost Fae. The thought of their touch on my skin still gave me the urge to take a scalding hot shower. I knew for a fact that they had a body now, one attractive, Fae male body to be exact. He made my skin crawl even more so than the formless blob did.

“And ye know Alice had to be responsible for it.” The brownie spat her name out like a plague to the Fae world. Which, in a way, she was.

The Alice I had read about in human fairy tales wasn't as innocent as Lewis Carroll would have us believe. One thing he did get right was she was a tiresome little snot. She was as manipulative as any Fae, and since that was exactly what she had wished to be when she got involved with Dorian and my affairs, I guessed it was only fitting.

“Why do you think Alice had anything to do with it?” She kind of had a part in it, but since I wasn't about to tell him I was the one who helped the Shadows take their solid form, it was best to play along.

He gave me a look of exasperation as if I should have been able to guess what was inside his head. “Don't ye find it being a bit funny that when ye let her loose, the Shadows be gaining their form?”

“But I don't see how that matters? I thought no one even knew why Alice was in the Hall of Mirrors?” I tried to redirect the topic from the Shadows. I didn't know how much longer I could evade Mop's questions without outright lying. I didn't know how well his sense of smell was but if it was anything like Chess' the changes in my scent from my lie wouldn't be hidden for long.

“That be before ye be turnin' all royalty and such. Now that ye be alive, and Alice be free, anybody who knew anything be flappin' their jaws on what they know.” He crossed his arms over his chest as if he were completely disgusted with the whole affair.

Faes don't make mistakes, my ass. Dorian and my mother thought they had erased all traces of what happened to Alice and me after I, well, went away. I didn't really like to think about the fact that I had actually tried to off myself. Or the other me did. The human me was riding the denial train with no visible stops in sight.

“The problem be,” Mop continued. “How did she do it?”

“Do what?”

“Be makin’ them come together as one. It would be takin’ a lot of magic to make them into one form, let alone gettin’ them to agree to bein’ one form. I didn’t think that child be havin’ what it takes to get them agreein’ let alone the magical oomph it be takin’ to do that kinda spell.” He gave a small shudder. “Death magic be a nasty business. Nobody be wantin’ to get involved with that kind of bad mojo. Even the Fae that do, be tryin’ to blame it on others so the reaper don’ be lookin’ for them.”

Fan-fucking-tastic.

Mop was right. Death magic was a big no-no, and most Fae wouldn’t even touch it. But there were some, the kind of Fae who had no qualms about using forbidden magics, and they always came with a price. Usually, that price was your life in return.

I could only hope I wasn’t the one who was going to have to pay that price, since technically I had given the Shadows permission to use the magics. Just because I didn’t do the spell, didn’t mean I wasn’t to blame.

“What be yer problem? Ye lookin’ kind of sick.”

My face must have shown my horror of the situation I had gotten myself in. Well, more like my human side had gotten myself in. If I’d had half the knowledge I did now about the Fae realm, I could have avoided so many problems that I found were creeping up on me. My insides twisted around in knots.

“I’m fine.”

“No, ye ain’t. Ye should sit down, yer not lookin’ too good.” Mop jumped up from his seat, holding a hand out to me.

“I’m fine, really.” I tried to wave him off even as a spout of dizziness made me sway on my feet.

There was no use crying over what was and what could have been. It was the here and now that had me worried. What was going to happen to me? I didn’t make a blood oath to the Shadows, not that I was sure it would have held, anyway. So I probably had a bit of time before I had to pay the debt. Hopefully, it was enough time to figure out how to get rid of the creepy smiling Shadow man. I had no ambitions to be the Queen of the entire Fae Realm, let alone the Queen of the Shadow Realm.

Hell, I didn’t even know if I wanted to be the Seelie Princess. They couldn’t expect me to come crawling back so soon. I still had to get my own head sorted before I could rule anything, and I didn’t even want to get

started on my love life. Who the hell knew what was going on there? I knew I didn't.

I needed a vacation from my life, both of them. Where could I go where no one else would find me? Apparently, my mind had finally caught up with the shit storm that was my life and decided the floor looked like a lovely place to rest.



Chapter 4

Glamoured Pain

AFTER MY EMBARRASSING fainting spell, I convinced Mop that the only thing I needed was to go to work. The quiet solace of the library was exactly where I needed to be. Here I could pretend I was just a normal girl trying to act like her boss wasn't a stone cold bitch and shelving books wasn't a tedious and suicide-inducing experience. But at least it was quiet.

Shoving the last book onto the shelf, I pushed my little cart around to the next aisle. Out of all the things I expected to be doing as a librarian, I actually thought shelving books would have been the most fun. Like I would discover a new adventure that I would have never learned had I not been trying to find the book that lived on that shelf. Instead, I found my hands felt grimy from some of the less cared for books, and my boss, Brandi, was constantly breathing down my neck.

She'd come to check on me at least five times since I had started shelving the latest intakes, and I was beginning to think she didn't trust me not to mess it up. Though, I had just feigned sick so I wouldn't have to come in after I got back from the Underground.

Could anyone blame a girl for not being up to facing the world with everything that had happened? I wouldn't.

Not that Brandi knew that. She took one look at my pale blonde hair and my vibrant blue eyes and pursed her lips like she wanted to blow her top off. But she hadn't said a word.

It was already two o'clock, and the most she had done was check up on me. Constantly. Of course, this made shelving all the more tedious.

When I picked the next book off my cart, I had a wild idea. I glanced around the aisle, peeking my head out between the bookshelves before turning back to the shelf in front of me.

I grinned down at the book in my hand—a hardback copy of some thriller that was all the rage—and tried to pull my magic up. It kind of wiggled in my stomach, as if waking from sleep.

I hadn't tried to use my magic on purpose without being hurt or angry since the time at the glowing tree. I had gotten the fruit to float to me, but it

had taken a bit of coaxing. It seemed like my magic was as prickly as I was and needed more than a little push to get moving.

It had to be like riding a bike. I used to be able to do all kinds of things with my magic without even thinking about it. One time, to get back at my Fae mother, I changed all the cherries in her tarts to raspberries, a flavor she finds completely vile, and I'd done it with just a snap of my fingers. Moving a book should be a piece of cake.

I stared down at the book in my hand, scrunching my brow together as if it would make me concentrate harder. The book twittered in my hands for a moment before floating just above my palms. Just as I was about to praise myself for my accomplishment, it dropped back into my hands. Startled by the sudden weight, my hands let the book slip through my fingers, and it landed with a loud boom on the library floor.

I winced, and then waited to hear the telltale sound of Brandi's feet, but she didn't make an appearance. I heaved a sigh of relief. Bending down to pick up the traitorous book, I dusted it off and grumbled under my breath at my own stupidity. Doing magic in public? Really? Did I want to be carted off to the mental ward? Or worse yet, experimented on? Because that was exactly what was going to happen if someone caught me.

I couldn't imagine the world reacting well to the thought of real magic. The human idea of magic was pyrotechnics and CGI. We couldn't even accept each other for our skin color or sexual orientation; the Fae mingling in this realm would be like an alien invasion, one that resulted in a shoot first and dissect later kind of war. Though, with the way things were going in the Underground, humans finding out about the Fae should be the last thing on my mind. Fae were disappearing and the Shadows were on the rampage.

"What are you doing, Katherine?" Brandi said from behind me.

I dropped the book mid-shelving. It slammed against the floor again, and I cringed. I drew back my shoulders and turned to face Brandi. Her lips were pursed so tight that I could barely make out the light pink of her lipstick. I couldn't tell if her eyebrows were raised or if the arch in them was just made that way. I stifled down a smile at the thought.

"I hope you are taking more care than this with the other books, Katherine. I wouldn't want to have to dock them from your pay for damages." The tone of her voice made me think that was exactly what she hoped to do.

My fists curled into tight balls, and I clenched my teeth. “No, we wouldn’t want that.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and appraised my ridged form. Oh, here it comes. I knew it would come sooner or later.

“You know, I don’t know what I am going to do with you. First, I give you a job out of the kindness of my heart, even though you don’t have the qualifications. Then not even three weeks in you call in sick supposedly with the flu, but then you come back with your hair colored completely blonde.” She gestured a hand at my head. I had it pulled back into a ponytail to keep out of the way. “Not that I am complaining, mind you, it is a wonderful change from that garish auburn you’ve been sporting.”

Each word was like an accelerant for my anger. She always knew how to give a backhanded compliment. I could feel my magic buzzing under my skin as she continued on about my looks.

“I could have forgiven the hair. I, myself, have skipped out on work to go on a much-needed spa day, but those eyes!” She pointed her perfectly manicured finger at me, and I forced myself not to step back as it got close to my face. “I don’t know what kind of person wants to change the color of their eyes and to such an unnatural color. I didn’t even know you wore contacts. Is that new? You know, you really should take better care of yourself. You’re already not looking too fit.” She paused, glancing down at my hips. “And we are getting older. We must keep up with our health, or what else do we have? Am I right?”

I tried to answer her—I really did—but I knew the moment I opened my mouth all of my magic would fly out of me and knock Brandi out of her thousand dollar heels, and then where would I be? Out of work and out of the Fae closet.

“Well?” She stared at me. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Struggling to swallow my magic back down my throat, I made a gagging sound.

“Oh, my. You’re not going to be sick are you?” Her face twisted in disgust.

A warm hand slid into mine, and a calm voice purred in my ear, “No, she won’t. She will be just fine.”

The feel of Chess’ hand in mine calmed my magic, and it settled back into my skin where it belonged. The wide-eyed dreamy look in Brandi’s eyes forced me to jerk around to look at Chess.

I almost didn't recognize him. He looked so normal—well, as normal as Chess could be as a hot runway model human. The cat ears were gone, and his pale pink hair was now a soft white that my fingers itched to be tangled in. He wore a dark button-down shirt with the top few buttons open to display the pale white skin below. He still had on an array of metal studded belts, but his tail was noticeably absent.

"Katherine? Who is your friend?" Brandi's voice pulled me away from Chess' emerald eyes that were alight with amusement.

"Uh. Um." I glanced at Brandi and then back to Chess, who graced me with a full, fangless grin. "He's um, my..."

Chess wrapped his arm around my waist and jerked me flush against his side. He slid his clawless finger under my chin and tipped my face up to his, and in my speechless daze; I barely registered the feather-like brush of his lips across mine.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm Kat's beau."

I licked my lips at his words knowing I should protest, but I was too shocked to do much else but let him do what he willed.

"Oh? Her boyfriend? Really?" The incredulous tone of her voice snapped me out of my haze.

My eyes narrowed at the disbelieving raise of her brows, and I forced back a snarl. "Yes. My boyfriend."

Chess wasn't my anything, but I sure as hell wasn't letting that bitch know. She would dig her claws into him before I could say Wonderland. I wrapped my arms around Chess' waist and gave him a squeeze.

"Well hurry up and finish here. There is more work to do." She huffed and marched out of the aisle.

With the boss lady gone, I glanced up to ask Chess what the hell he was doing here but halted. His mouth was tight, and his eyes were slightly pinched. I moved back and looked him over more closely. His eyes, while as vibrant as ever in color, were filled with a bit of haze as if he weren't really there. His chest moved up and down in a rampant effort. I leaned away from him further and noticed a crimson wetness had shown up from where I had been pressed against him. His shirt stuck to him, and there was a slight stain of red on my own yellow shirt.

"Chess! You're bleeding."

"I'm fine, love." He pulled away from me and propped himself against one of the bookshelves, his image flickered back and forth between Fae and

human form.

The pained sound of his voice did nothing to reassure me he was telling the truth. I stuck my head into the aisle checking for Brandi or any of my other coworkers. The library was pretty dead this time of day with school not out yet and parents still at work. I could probably get him to the bathroom undetected. With the way he was flickering, I didn't want to give some unsuspecting kiddie a scare.

"Come on." I grabbed Chess by the arm and dragged him out of the shelves and around the computers before ducking into the family bathroom.

Snapping the door shut behind me, I locked it and turned to Chess. He was resting against the sink, his fingers digging into the sides of the porcelain.

"What the fuck, Chess?" I stalked up behind him, trying to assess the damage from outside his clothes. "You get summoned to court for some unknown reason and come back bleeding?"

I pulled a handful of paper towels from the dispenser and lifted the side of his shirt to press them against his skin.

"You shouldn't bother, love." He grunted when I applied more pressure. "I'll heal on my own."

"That aside, you shouldn't be walking around when you are this hurt." I glared at him. "And since when could you use a glamour?"

"Why, because I'm a half-breed?" The venom in his voice knocked the complaint right out of me.

"No?" My voice became softer and less accusing than before. "I just assumed you'd have used it before now. I mean, if you were High Fae you would have."

"Like they are so great." He scoffed and then groaned as if the sound caused him pain. "I'll have you know, my mother was High Fae."

Curious now that he was actually opening up to me, I pressed more, "And your father?"

"Can't you guess?" He smirked at me with a grimace and then dropped his glamour to show his gorgeous pink mane in place of the pale blonde tresses. My eyes widened at the purpling bruise on his neck.

"Holy fuck." I stepped closer, putting one hand up to touch the bruise. He flinched, and I halted. "It's okay, Chess. I'm not going to hurt you, I just want to see."

He let out a pained chuckle and let me push his hair away from his throat to see the ring of purple blemishes around his neck. Being as careful as possible, I moved his collar aside. More bruises trailed down under his shirt.

I started to unbutton his shirt. I needed to see what else they had done to him. How much pain was he in?

“Woah, kitten.” He brushed my hands away with a flirty grin. “If you wanted me out of my clothes, all you had to do was ask.”

“Let me see, Chess.”

His grin faltered. “What does it matter? I’m fine. The fiasco with your friend just opened them back up is all. They were almost done healing already.”

“They?” I didn’t ask this time. I grabbed the edges of his shirt and pulled. Buttons popped from the shirt and onto the floor, exposing his pale skin. I’d have liked to linger on the hard planes of his chest, but the dark array of bruises and small crisscross cuts that decorated his side drew my eyes.

“It’s not bad at all. See?” He gestured to the area as he tried to hide a grimace on his face.

“Not bad at all?” I gaped at him. “Chess, you look like you’ve been in a fight with Teeth and lost!”

“Nonsense. Teeth wouldn’t give me the time a day, let alone long enough to get in a fight with.” He lifted up the edges of his shirt and frowned at the missing buttons. “You know, I really liked this shirt.”

A growl left my throat. “Who did this to you?”

Not looking up from his shirt, he shrugged in a very feline way. “Oh, you know, the usual. An enraged spouse of some Fae or another upset that their loved one found their way into my loving claws.”

I frowned. He was trying to deter me from the real culprit, but I didn’t know him well enough to push the right buttons to get him to spill the beans. He, on the other hand, obviously knew what to do to rile me up.

“Never mind about me.” He finally looked up from his shirt and locked his eyes on me. “You should be worrying about the mishap that almost happened out there.”

“Everything is so hard now. I used to know this stuff. How to control it. It was unheard of for me to have something like that happen to me. So why can’t I figure this out?” I bit my lip, frustration filling me.

He tapped me under the chin. “That’s because your Fae body knew what to do. Your human body is still new to all this. You’ll have to learn everything all over again, but this time without being able to ease into it like most Fae children do.”

I poked my lip out in a pout. “How am I supposed to do that? Mop said only someone with powers like mine could help me.”

“I will.”

My ears perked up at that. “You could really help me? But you don’t have the same abilities as me, do you?”

“Not all of them. But the basics would be enough to get you started. At least help keep you from creating a global incident.” His tail slid out and wrapped itself around my waist. “And there is so much I want to teach you, my sweet Kat. Every one of them just as magical.”

I tried not to grin at the corniness of his words, but there was something about him that always made me want to smile or rip off his clothes. While the latter had potential, he was right: my almost blowing up on Brandi was more important at the moment than the bruises that would fade. If only the ache in my heart that said something wasn’t right would fade with it.



Chapter 5

School of Magic

AFTER WORK I found myself standing in the backyard of my grandmother's house with Chess ready to take on the role of teacher.

"Glamours are the basic level magic that many High Fae children master before their first five years. You remember this, correct?" His eyes trailed over me.

Even in my baggiest shirt and most unflattering sweatpants, I still felt like his eyes were undressing me. Too bad my insides didn't find that a bad thing. Reeling back my hormones, I focused on what he asked me.

"Yeah." I shuffled from one foot to the other, recalling what I knew of glamours. I remembered being able to use it in my previous life, but Alice and Chess were the only ones I'd seen use one as a human.

"Well? Don't keep teacher waiting," Chess drawled, which ended up sounding more like a purr.

I crossed my arms over my chest and leveled him with an unamused glare. "There are three kinds of glamours."

"Right you are, and what are they?" He held up three fingers.

I threw my hands up in the air with a sigh, giving into his silly game. "Well, there's a visual glamour."

Chess smirked at my unenthused answer. "And that is?"

The fucker was enjoying this.

"A visual glamour only makes you look like whatever you are changing into." Before he could jump in and ask another asinine question, I continued, "Say you are really fat and want to appear thinner, it doesn't mean you are thinner. Someone that tries to hug you is going to freak out when they get stopped by your big invisible belly."

He gave me a disapproving look at my analogy but then curled his lips into a teasing grin. "So, what if you wanted to look and feel thinner? Not that you need it." He took a step closer to me and placed his hands on the swell of my hips. "Curves like yours keep men up at night."

I snorted at his attempt to flirt and pushed him away, holding up two fingers. "Second kind. Physical glamour. The ability to not only look but

feel like what you are trying to pretend to be.”

“And what’s left? You can look and feel like anyone. Why would you need to go a step further?” He leaned into me, unconvincingly sniffing me as a hint and not for his own perverse pleasure.

“Because Fae have a great sense of smell, which makes it harder to lie to them, so you would need to not only change your appearance but change your scent too.” I tapped my chin as I thought about it. “It’s actually something that is really difficult to do and takes a lot of magic and control to accomplish, but if a Fae happens to be able to do it, they could fool even the most powerful Fae into believing they were someone else.”

As the words left my mouth, I realized something. I’d been trying to figure out how Alice had been able to trick Dorian into believing she was me. It hadn’t even crossed my mind that she could have done a full glamour because it was so unheard of that it wasn’t even something that was considered anymore. It was the only logical reason that Dorian could have been tricked, and if it was true, I owed Dorian a huge apology. But why did I see Alice when he saw me? It didn’t make any sense, unless Alice was better at controlling her glamour than she thought.

If Alice really had that kind of power, she was as much of a threat as the Shadow man, if not more. And if the Shadow man got ahold of Alice? We were all in trouble.

“What are you thinking about in that pretty little head of yours?” Chess asked with a hint of concern.

My gaze jerked up to him. I took a startled step back at how close his face was to mine. The green in his eyes gleamed with curiosity.

“Uh, nothing,” I muttered, but it didn’t sound convincing even to me.

He frowned at my lie but didn’t question it. Instead, he strolled away from me and into the lines of vegetables in the garden. My gaze wandered after him, watching the way his pants clung to his behind. Thankfully, he had left the glamour off since we were at the house. I didn’t expect any company anytime soon, and if anyone did choose to stop by, I hoped being in the backyard would give us enough warning to be prepared.

When he was done doing his little catwalk and made his way back over to me, the frown was gone from his face and in its place, his usual flirty smile. I was beginning to think that smile wasn’t meant to seduce but to hide his real feelings. It made me wonder what else he concealed behind that smile.

“So, you know what a glamour is. Now to put it into effect.” He flipped his braided hair over his shoulder, a movement I started to dissect to have some kind of secret meaning as well.

“Okay?” I let the question hang in the air.

Instead of answering, he reached around and pulled my hair out of my messy bun, and when he brushed my hair out with his fingers, I resisted the urge to purr. He lifted one of the pale strands up to his nose, his eyes watching my face.

“Okay.” I cleared my throat, angling my head to pull my hair from his grip. “So you want me to glamour my hair?”

Straightening up, he gave a nonchalant shrug. “Unless you would like to keep explaining your appearance to your friends and family.”

“Well, my hair isn’t so hard to explain. Lots of people color their hair nowadays, and no one really cares. What I really need to glamour are my eyes. Telling Brandi that I got colored contacts is one thing, but I don’t want to have to constantly defend it to my mother, which I’m sure will happen when I eventually can’t avoid her any longer.”

“If you insist. Now focus,” he demanded.

My brow creased, but I closed my eyes and tried to focus on changing the color of my irises. I felt a bit silly closing my eyes. Before, I didn’t even need to think about my magic to make what I wanted happen, but as every bad martial artist movie taught me, nothing gets you focused like losing one of your senses. All I was missing was a training montage and Chess singing a fatherly ballad about letting me find my way. Though, the thought of calling Chess *daddy* in any sense was a little too on the kinky side for my tastes.

Taking a deep breath, I reached for the magic inside me, coaxing it up to do my will. It fluttered around; slow and languid at first before creeping up to greet me. I felt it fill me up like a pressure under my skin.

Next, I tried to imagine what my eyes looked like before: a deep forest green with a bit of gold around the middle, almost more hazel than green. With the image in my mind, I pushed my magic, willing my eyes to be that color again. My eyes tingled, and then the magic became dormant once more.

Peeking an eye open, I chanced a look at Chess, who cocked his head.

“Well? Did I do it?” I strained my eyelids open so he could see.

A deep frown filled his face as he assessed the change I couldn't see. "Not exactly."

"What do you mean, not exactly? Either I did, or I didn't." I gave an impatient huff.

"Well, you changed them all right, but unless your eyes were a muddy kind of vomit color, I think you need more practice." He tapped his chin in thought before stepping up to me. "I have an idea."

I hesitated at his close proximity and went to take a step back but was stopped by his hand on my wrist.

"Wait. Hear me out before you start getting suspicious. I'm not going to bite you." He gave me a cheeky grin. "Well, at least not right now."

"Like that makes it any better," I grumbled, but let him draw me closer.

"I think what your problem is, is imagination." He placed both of his hands on my face, bringing me eye to eye with him. "We should have started with this to begin with, rather than making you rely on your shotty human memory."

"Hey!" I pulled back but didn't get far with my face trapped between his claws. "My memory is fine."

He gave an indelicate snort. "So I see."

"Fine." I crossed my arms over my chest. "What do you want me to do, all masterful one?"

A dark heated look filled his eyes. I swallowed hard, an apology on my lips, but he shrugged.

"You are going to make your eyes look like mine."

My shoulders slumped with relief that he wasn't going to make a big deal about my attitude.

"No offense," I said. "But I don't exactly think having cat eyes will help my little situation."

He gave me a pointed look, and I clammed up any further protests.

"The point is that you will have something in front of you to visualize and not rely on your own mind to create it. This is just step one. Once you can copy my eyes, you can go back to working on your normal color. All right?"

My lips curled down. I didn't really like his plan, but I shrugged in acceptance anyway.

“So what I want you to do is focus on my eyes.” His pupils locked on mine.

“But don’t I need to wake my magic first?” I tried to pull back to look at him properly.

“No. Don’t even think about your magic. Just watch here.” He pulled my face closer to him until our noses brushed against each other.

I glanced down to his mouth, so close to mine, and my tongue dipped out to wet my suddenly dry lips. As much as I liked to berate Chess for his lecherous ways, I remembered what it was like to be at the mercy of those lips. The way he kissed me made me feel like he wasn’t just trying to taste me, but devour me. As if he couldn’t get enough. And his hands could do the most wicked things. He didn’t even have to touch the usual places that got me going with most guys. His hands on my skin were enough.

“Focus, Kat.” His voice came out a rough growl as if he too was affected by our closeness. “Focus on my eyes. On the color. The emerald green that sparkles in the sun at the right angle. The little details. The different shades that make up the color as a whole.” The soothing sound of his voice in correspondence to looking deep into his eyes made the rest of the world melt away until it was just him. “Do you see the way the pupil dilates as the clouds pass over the sun?”

I hummed in my throat a response. I felt like a snake trapped in a charmer’s song. Except this charmer’s body was far more lethal and his voice more tempting than any flute could provide.

“You want to have eyes like these. Of course you do. It is only normal to want what others have,” he whispered the words like the little devil on my shoulder telling me it was all right to want the naughty things. In fact, he would help me get them. “Tell me, my little kitty Kat. Tell me you want them.”

I only gaped at him in a daze before I realized I did want his eyes. I wanted to be able to see what he saw. Look out at the world from his point of view and see how it would feel to be Cheshire S. Cat: sexy, confident, a bit cocky, and dangerous to not only my libido but my heart as well.

“Tell me?” He asked again, his voice becoming huskier as if knowing exactly what was running through my mind.

“I do,” I croaked out before clearing my throat to try again. “I want them.”

“Then let yourself have them.” Without warning, his lips crashed onto mine.

My mouth opened in a startled gasp and his tongue swept into my mouth. His hands moved from the side of my face to the back of my neck, tilting me to a more pleasing angle. I let myself be controlled by our desire. My hands sought out the front of his shirt as my magic spread through me like a tidal wave with one goal in mind: to give me what I wanted.

My body hummed with power, and it poured into every inch of me. My senses became more aware of my surroundings. The feel of the cotton shirt beneath my fingers almost burned the tips from its roughness. My hands moved away to tangle in the softest of silk strands at his shoulders. I stroked them as my nose became engulfed in his deep, masculine smell. The combination of his scent mixed with the delicious taste of his lips caused my insides to clench in a consuming need.

“What the hell be goin’ on here?” Mop’s voice cut through the fog of lust and magic muddling my brain.

I jerked back from Chess, a sharp pain stinging my tongue. The coppery taste of blood filled my mouth.

“Shit.” The curse word came out of my mouth but was not in my voice. It was deeper and buttery. I glanced over at Chess who gave an amused, but slightly surprised smile, not at all comforting my fears.

I reached a hand up to touch where my lip had gotten nicked by my — fangs? I had fangs? My heart sped up as I spread my fingers out to touch my face. Gone were the soft rounded edges, and in their place were more defined cheekbones and a strong jawline.

Holy fuck! I chanted over and over in my head as I took in each changed feature.

My eyes had become more sensitive to the light, and I squinted as I looked down at my body. My clothes were still the same, but my baggy sweatpants were tight against my body as was the t-shirt, showing off my new defined muscles. I was half tempted to check down my pants to see what was going on down there as well, but Mop’s voice broke my thoughts.

“Is one of ye goin’ to tell me what is goin’ on? Why be there two of ye? And where be Lady?” Mop waved his hands at us.

“Yes, yes. Trip wishes to know, Trip does.” Trip popped in.

His beady eyes seemed huge against his furred face as he stood up on the tips of his feet to get a better look at me. His ears were pointed high up

in the air, and his tail wagged behind him.

Chess smirked and gestured his hand at me. Mop and Trip turned their gaze to where I stood. I tugged on my new pink hair, feeling weird and uncomfortable in Chess' skin. After a moment, I gave a nervous laugh and waved.

"Hi, guys." The buttery smooth sound of Chess' voice coming out of my own mouth sounded awkward and not sexy at all. How did he do it?

"Lady?" Trip eyed me for a moment, before creeping up to me, his nose pointed toward me to sniff the air. "Lady looks like Smiling Cat, Lady does. Lady even smells like Smiling Cat!"

Mop circled around me, one hand stroking his chin as he took in my appearance. "How be this possible?"

I gave an inelegant shrug. Geez, how did he make his body move so fluidly, so sensual? While I might look like the feline, I sure as hell didn't feel like him. It was like a square that had been shoved into a circle peg. Cramped and claustrophobic. I was beginning to feel a bit light headed.

A coppery metal smell filled my senses, and a warm trickle came out of my nose. Chess' nose. Somebody's nose. My hand went up to touch where I had started bleeding when the world tilted.

Strong arms wrapped around me, breaking my fall, and the musky scent that was purely Chess mixed with the coppery smell of blood. My limbs felt heavy, and my eyelids fought to stay open as my magic flowed out of me, leaving me empty and weak inside.

"Don't worry love, I've got you." Chess lifted me into his arms and carried me across the yard.

As the door to the kitchen closed behind us, I lost consciousness.



Chapter 6

Debts To Be Paid

WHEN I AWOKE, I found myself lying in my own bed. I jerked up and then grabbed my head in pain. *Fuck*. It was like a horde of sorority girls were jumping around having a pillow fight on every squishy surface of my brain.

“Slow now, kitten,” Chess said from somewhere nearby. I peeked out from my partially closed eyes to see him leaning against the doorframe of my bedroom. “You’re going to feel a bit worn out for a while.”

“What happened?” Before he could answer, I remembered. “Wait!” I glanced down at myself, and if my head didn’t throb so much, I would have jumped up and done a little dance. “I’m me again!”

I wrapped my arms around myself in a tight hug, not caring that Chess was laughing at me. I touched my face, stroking the soft curve of my cheek, and gave a blissful sigh.

“Should I leave you two alone?” Chess chuckled as he made his way over to the bed. “Though, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to stay and watch.”

I was too happy to be myself again to chastise him for being such a perv. I plopped back against the headboard and sighed. I never wanted to experience that again. I couldn’t even imagine what it had looked like to Mop and Trip seeing Chess making out with himself. I was embarrassed to find out parts of me heated at the vision of two Chesses.

And I thought he was perverted.

Shaking my head, I turned back to him, ignoring the knowing grin on his face. “So what happened? How did I even do that?”

He hummed to himself and leaned onto one arm. “You weren’t able to do a full glamour before?”

“No, I think I would remember being able to completely glamour myself.” I had a few abilities back when I was full Fae, but nothing that powerful. I could manipulate objects, and I had a super green thumb—I could just touch a dying plant and bring new life to it—but I wasn’t about to win any magical awards for it.

“Well, it must have something to do with your human side.” Chess offered while one of his fingers traced circles on my thigh over the covers.

I placed my hand on his to stop him, but it only caused a tingle to rush through me. I moved his hand out of my lap and drew my legs up to my chest. Placing my chin on my knees, I looked off to the side and ignored his knowing grin.

“I’m not sure. I would think being mostly human would make me, weaker not stronger,” I said.

“Not necessarily. Magic doesn’t have the kind of rules you would think.”

I snorted. “But the Fae are all about the rules.”

“True, but that is self-inflicted.” He waved his hand in the air. “If we didn’t give ourselves restrictions, then there would be chaos. Fae killing one another. Jumping time with no regards for the consequences. You never know what could happen.”

Guilt filled me when he mentioned jumping time. That guy. J. S., whoever he was, was dead because of me. Because of what I let the Shadows do.

“The cat be right.” Mop waddled into my room, Trip hopping along behind him. “There be rules that be there for a reason.”

“I don’t remember there being so many rules before.”

Trip jumped up onto my bed, bouncing on the spring mattress. A slight sound of joy came out of his mouth. I let out a small giggle at the happiness on his face. It had only been about a week, but I’d missed Trip and his childlike personality. He made everything seem fun and new. If only everyone was that way.

“Trip is happy to see Lady is Lady again, Trip is.” The opalaught snuggled up next to me on the bed, clinging to my arm. I stroked between his ears and smiled.

“I’m glad to be me again too, and I’m really glad to see you.” I squeezed him tight. His ears tickled my face. “How is Hare holding up?”

Trip’s ears dropped at the mention of Hare, and I regretted saying anything. “Hare is no good. Hare is not.”

“Why? What happened?”

“It be them damn Shadows!” Mop cursed and spit on the ground. I grimaced, not looking forward to cleaning up brownie slobber. “Hare be gone missin’ and Hatter be beside himself. He has locked himself inside his

home and won't come out. Most of the other Fae have done the same. Bunch of cowards!"

"You'd be cowering in your home if you'd met the Shadow man too," I growled out then quickly tried to change the subject when I realized my mistake. "So, why are you two here?"

Trip opened his mouth but was interrupted by Mop.

"How do ye know what it be like? I only just told ye they be corporeal the other day." The suspicion in Mop's eyes cut through me like a razor.

I looked away and out toward the mirror in my room. It was one of those long, full-length mirrors. Ever since I got back I had taken up the habit of covering it with a dark sheet. I could never be too careful of who was listening.

"You remember how I said I took care of it?" I started, still not meeting any of their eyes.

"Yeah?" Mop asked.

There was a lot of judgment just in that one word. I couldn't imagine how the grumpy brownie was going to react when he heard what I had done.

"Well, you know I let Alice out, right?"

Mop nodded at me.

"And how I had a run in with the Shadows while in there?"

"Ye still never told me why ye hair turned white, though now knowin' what I know now, I'd imagine it be havin' more to do with yer Fae powers than them Shadows."

"Actually, that was partly Seer's fault," I pointed out. "Just ask the prince. He was there."

"But what happened with the Shadows, kitten?" Chess leaned in closer, a wicked glint in his eye as if he had more at stake with what I had to say than any of them.

"Uh." I hesitated. "Well, you see. What happened is..." I took a deep breath and then just spilled it all out in one go. "They want me to be their queen so they can get back at the other Queens, but they wouldn't let me wake up so I could find Alice 'cause of the whole incorporeal thing, and so we made a deal where they could take the body of one of the Fae locked away in the Hall of Mirrors that was going to die soon anyway. Except, they kind of stretched the truth on that one, and now they are running amuck, and it's all my fault 'cause they are just looking for me!"

I heaved in air as I tried to catch my breath. I watched the faces of those around me, waiting for the horror and anger that was sure to creep onto their faces, but they all busted out laughing.

“What? What’s so funny?” I growled out. How could they find this amusing?

I searched Mop’s face, but he just slapped his knee as his laughter became worse. Trip rolled around on the bed, giggling like a madman, and even Chess, who was supposed to be on my side, was chuckling at my expense.

“Would someone tell me what is going on?” I twisted my fists into the sheets of my bed, trying to get a hold on my anger. I didn’t remember being so emotional before, but for some reason the more magic I used, the more it grew, the more of an emotional wreck I became.

Chess quit laughing first and patted me on the knee. “We aren’t laughing at you, precious.”

“Then what are you laughing at?” I pouted and crossed my arms over my chest.

“The Shadows—” Mop tried to get out but started chortling again. “Sorry, sorry.” He coughed, forcing his laughter back though his eyes still glittered with unshed tears. “I be fine now.”

I raised my eyebrow. “Well?”

“The Shadows don’t be needin’ ye to get their revenge.” The smirk on Mop’s face looked out of place. “They can be gettin’ their own revenge without ye helpin’ them.”

“Is that so? Then why were they trying so hard to get me on their side? They said they needed someone who wasn’t bound by the same rules as they were and obviously that means me.” I didn’t know why I was trying to justify why the Shadow man would want me. It wasn’t like I had any intention of going over to the dark side, so to speak, but to hear Mop say that I didn’t matter kind of stung.

Mop exchanged a look with Trip and Chess as if wondering what he should say.

“What? What are you guys hiding from me?” I glanced at Chess, betrayal clear on my face. I trusted him to tell me the truth at least. Though, I shouldn’t be surprised he was keeping things from me— he was a cat, after all. Who the hell knew what was going on in a feline’s mind?

“Well, while you are quite a catch, my dear, and any Fae would be lucky to have you,” Chess said, picking my hand up and stroking it, “You aren’t exactly the only one.”

“What do you mean?” I ignored the way his hand made my skin tingle with every touch.

“What the cat be tryin’ to tell ye,” Mop jumped in, “is ye ain’t the only one who be able to pass between worlds without a key.”

“Well, I know that. Chess is half and half, and he can too.” I had a sudden thought, and my attention snapped to him. “Is that who hurt you? Was the Shadow man trying to get you to help him?”

Chess exchanged a look with Mop but didn’t answer. Instead, Trip tugged on a strand of my once again blonde hair.

“Lady is right, Lady is. Smiling Cat can, but so can others, they can.” Trip gave me a small, sad smile as if he knew something that I didn’t, which it seemed like that was going on a lot lately.

“What others?” I asked, but they once again looked amongst themselves. I’d had enough. “Stop doing that. Stop acting like I’m a child that needs protecting. I’m older than all of you combined. Well, my soul is at least, but that’s beside the point” I waved a finger in each of their direction. “You are keeping stuff from me, and I want—no, I need—to know what it is.”

Chess gave me a sympathetic half smile and then let out a reluctant sigh. “You have to remember that a lot has happened in the time you were gone. Not all of it good.”

Mop snorted. “That be an understatement if I ever heard one.”

Chess snapped his eyes to Mop in warning. Mop crossed his arms and stared Chess down as if daring him to chastise him.

“Like I was saying,” Chess turned back to me, ignoring the defiant little man, “A lot has happened in the time since you died and now.”

“I know that, and I know there is a lot of catching up to do, and if I’m going to make a sound decision on where my place in the world is—any world—shouldn’t I have all the facts?”

“Sometimes the truth isn’t always good for you,” Chess warned.

“I don’t care. I want to know,” I urged, but none of them offered up an explanation. I opened my mouth to continue to argue when Trip tugged on my arm.

“Lady can’t ask friends that, Lady can’t. There are rules, there are.” Trip’s frown did nothing to ease my need to know. In fact, it just made it stronger. They were hiding something. They all were.

“Even you, Chess? I thought you didn’t have to obey the rules?” I quirked a brow at him.

He looked me dead in the eye with a serious glare.

“This one I do. Let’s have no more talk of it.” The strictness in his voice called for no argument, but his face soon changed to a curious, playful manner as he turned to Trip. “What are you two doing here, anyway? Did his highness not trust me to keep our princess safe?”

“Bah! Like his highness would be askin’ us? I be here deliverin’ a message. A reminder.” Mop’s dark eyes locked with mine.

“A reminder?”

“That ye made promises. Blood oaths. Oaths ye better be keepin’ if ye know what be good for ya.”

Oh. That oath.

“Teeth be gettin’ impatient. Ye haven’ fulfilled your end of ye bargain yet. Ye don’t be havin’ much time left, can’t ye feel it?” Mop wagged his finger at me.

This was another one of those instances where I was supposed to feel something and I didn’t. When I had made the deal with the big fuzzy wall with sharp teeth that had become his namesake, I was supposed to have felt some kind of magical power in my blood. But like many things that had changed about me, the human half of me seemed to negate any rules that came from being Fae. So technically there wouldn’t be any consequences, but the honorable part of me urged me to do the right thing.

I smacked my head back against my headboard with a groan and then blew out a hard breath.

“Fine, let’s get this over with.” I nudged Chess over to get out of the bed and moved to the edge.

“Are you sure you are all right now, love?” Chess held his hand out to me with concern in his eyes.

I nodded, placing my hand in his. My head had stopped throbbing, and the weak feeling I had was gone.

The promise I had made to make biscuits for Teeth in exchange for my passage flashed through my mind. A hundred biscuits were nothing in the

human world. Besides, it wasn't like I was making biscuits from scratch. Who even did that anymore?

"Oh! Oh! Can Trip help, can Trip?" He jumped up and down on my bed his tail wagging behind him.

"Sure you can, Trip." I smiled back at him and headed for the bedroom door.

My room wasn't big, but then again, I didn't have many belongings, so I didn't need much. A stand-up dresser, single door closet, and a queen sized bed. The bedroom was my grandmother's, which was easily identified by the large flower print on the comforter and the massive amount of throw pillows. Really, who needed that many pillows? They were just there for looks, anyway.

"A hundred biscuits be a large order," Mop stated as he followed me into the kitchen. "How ye goin' to make all them biscuits on ye own?"

I smirked at Mop and opened the fridge where I had bought ten containers of biscuit dough.

I grabbed one of the cylinders and held it out to him. "Like this."

"What be that?" Mop gave the tub a cautious but curious once-over.

"Biscuits." I smacked the end of the cylinder on the side of the counter, and the container popped open.

Pushing a chair over to the counter, Mop glanced over my shoulder as I began to lay out the little white circles onto a pan.

"Them ain't biscuits." He poked his finger at the dough, and then sniffed his finger with a grimace.

I gave an impatient sigh. "Not yet they aren't, but in about ten minutes they will be." I moved over to the oven and hit the preheat button. "Humans might not have magic, but they have their own form of instant gratification."

Mop frowned. "I don't know. Seems like cheatin' to me."

I shoved the pan into the oven and closed it with a smack. "It's not cheating, it's efficient. I don't have hours to be slaving away in the kitchen to make some stupid biscuits. This way is faster, and Teeth won't even know the difference." I turned to the Fae in the room. "I thought you would know all about modern wonders?"

"Not everyone that comes to the human realm actually ventures out into the populated areas," Chess said from where he lounged at the kitchen table. He tapped his claws on the wood.

“So, you guys just come into our world to hang out in the woods and occasionally steal from people's gardens? That makes no sense whatsoever.” I shook my head at Trip who was nodding in an excessive manner.

“Trip likes Lady's carrots, Trip does!”

I smiled at the opalaught, because really, what else could I do? He was just too cute. But I expected more from Mop.

“What about you?”

Mop plopped down in the chair he was standing on and scoffed. “Like I want to be here? I only be here for Trip. I have me own family to worry ‘bout. I don’ be needin’ no human rubbish. Me wife would be havin’ me by the goods if I brought any of that silly stuff home.”

“You have a wife?” I didn’t try to hide the surprise in my voice. Not too long ago, Mop was complaining about the Seelie calling him ugly. That didn’t sound like someone who was in a happy and healthy marriage.

“Yeah. What about it?” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Do ye think I can’t get a woman? I have ye know, I be a catch amongst brownies. Any Fae or human would be lucky to have me.”

“Mop is right, Mop is.” Trip nodded. “Mop has biggest house in the whole brownie village, Mop does. Though, Mop’s wife isn’t very nice, she’s not.”

“Trip!” Mop shot him a glare.

Trip pulled his ears down around his face in defense against Mop’s sharp tone. I opened my mouth to comment when the oven went off at the same time the front door slammed shut, and the worst sound in the world called out from the living room.



Chapter 7

Mother Knows Best

MY MOTHER. THE sound of her voice struck fear in the very heart of any socialite who dared to cross her.

My human mother, who didn't know anything about the Fae realm, or that I wasn't completely human, had arrived home. If she stepped into the kitchen right now, she would see a little brown man whose head was not shaped right to be a normal human, a rabbit that could be rabid if tempted the wrong way, and a male supermodel who looked like he just stepped out of a Japanese comic book.

Yeah. That would go over well.

"Katherine! Did you hear me?" her voice called out from the living room. "It is rude not to greet your guests at the door."

"You're not a guest, Mom," I shouted and then turned to the others. "Hurry out the back door before she sees you. I'll leave the biscuits out on the counter for you to take to Teeth."

I pointed at Chess to tell him to throw his glamour on or get out, but he had beat me to the punch and sat with an amused, but curious expression on his face.

The back door slammed shut just as my mother stepped into the kitchen, marking Mop and Trip's exit. I proceeded to pull the biscuits out of the oven, knowing the rant that was about to come.

"Are you listening to me, Katherine? I swear you are just like your father, so defiant. Far too much spirit for a proper young lady." My mother slipped off her white gloves and held them in one hand.

She, who had barely hit fifty, was all about the Hillary Clinton look: matching skirt and blazers in sensible colors that didn't scream harlot, and enough hairspray in her hair to open a new hole in the ozone layer. She could have gone the hot trophy wife way, but instead, she went the 'I have to be the head of every charity and restoration group in the county' way. My dad might be a bookworm, and know how to crunch numbers like nobody's business, but my mother knew exactly how to wheedle the most out of her wealthiest investors.

Leaning back against the counter, I waited to see how long she would ream into me before she even noticed Chess was in the room. It could be a while. When she got on a tangent, there really was no stopping her.

“And your hair.” She waved her gloves at me, a scowl on her face. “While I appreciate that you have finally gone to the length to get it colored, I really wish you would have called me. I would have gotten you in with my girl.” She primped the edges of her own stiff, blonde bob. “And I’m not so sure I like the blonde on you. Your sister can pull it off because she has the right skin tone, but sadly, you take after your father in that aspect. You might consider going more of a Champagne blonde next time. I can...” she trailed off mid rant when Chess couldn’t hold back a chuckle.

“Well, hello. Katherine, why didn’t you tell me you had company?” Her blue eyes stabbed into me, showing her displeasure in a nonverbal capacity. She was good like that. A single look from her could kill a guy’s boner in an instant and a young daughter’s self-esteem for life. My mother turned to Chess with a smile. “I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Katherine’s mother, Sylvia.”

Chess unwrapped himself from his chair and took my mother’s hand in his, bending down to brush his lips on top of it.

“It is a pleasure to meet such a lovely woman,” he purred, humor lighting his eyes as he looked up at my mother through his long eyelashes. The cheater. “I can see where my Kat gets her good looks from.”

My mother giggled. The stiff upper lipped Republican fucking giggled. Like a high school girl! Well, at least I wasn’t the only one affected by Chess’ charm.

“Why, I don’t know about that, but you are charming.” She giggled again, and I found myself smirking at them.

“Mom, this is Chess. Chess, my mom.” I watched with ongoing amusement as I introduced them.

At least Chess was good for something other than eye candy. I might have to make him my certified mother-daughter buffer.

“Chess?” She looked at me in question. “That’s an unusual name. However, did you come by it?”

“It’s a family name.” Chess took the inquiry in stride. “My full name is Cheshire, but as you may notice my friends call me Chess, as may you.”

“So, is that what you two are? Friends?” She placed an innocent hand up to her face, looking between us.

“Mom!”

My mother, ever the tactful one.

Chess chuckled in that way that made my insides tingle. He left my mother’s side and approached me. Wrapping a strand of my hair around his finger, he tugged on it, sending a small zing into my scalp.

“I would like to know as well.” Chess’ eyes lit up with humor. “Are we friends, pet?”

My face became hot at the nickname, and his proximity only made my embarrassment worse under my mother’s watchful eye.

“Yes,” I stuttered, not exactly sure what we were.

I was attracted to him, but my life was way too complicated to be thinking about having a boyfriend, human or not. There was also the ever-looming question of what to do about Dorian haunting me every moment of my life.

“Yes? Yes, what?” Chess prodded.

I glared up at him and gritted my teeth, no longer amused. “Yes, we are friends.”

My mother made a knowing hum.

My eyes snapped back to her. “What?”

She looked down as she began to put her gloves back on. “Oh, nothing. I can see you are very good friends. But I really should be going, dear. I only came by to see if you were coming to Sunday dinner, since you missed the last one.”

“And you couldn’t have called for that?” I patted my pocket, wondering where the hell my phone had gone. I swear I had it a moment ago. Maybe it was still in the backyard.

“I would have if you bothered to answer any of my calls.” She frowned briefly before turning to Chess with a smile. “It was delightful to meet you, Chess. I do hope to see you again soon. Maybe you could come with Katherine to Sunday dinner? Then you could meet the whole family. It’s been awhile since Katherine has brought any of her friends over to meet us.” She gave me a pointed look.

“No,” I jumped in before Chess could answer. “No. I’m sure Chess has other places to be, other business to attend to than a silly family dinner.”

“I’d be delighted,” Chess called out over my head, and I glared up at him.

“Good,” my mother chirped. “Well, now that is settled, Katherine, will you walk me to the door?”

“Of course, Mom,” I gritted out and followed her out of the kitchen, knowing that Chess was enjoying himself far too much.

When we reached the front door, she pounced.

“What is going on with you? You don’t answer any of our calls. Your father is beside himself with worry, and you know how he gets. His cholesterol is already through the roof, and he doesn’t need to be oversteering himself.”

I sighed and grabbed my hair. “I’m sorry. I’m just going through some stuff right now. I didn’t mean to make Dad worry.”

“Stuff like missing work?”

“Ugh. What? Did Brandi call you? That’s why you came by?” I growled, hating that bitch all the more.

“And what about your sudden hair change. Or maybe your unusual need for colored contacts? Are you insecure?” She brushed a strand of hair away from my face and tucked it behind my ear in the only motherly manner she had ever portrayed to me. “Did someone say something to you, Katherine? Because you know, I always say that no one can make you feel bad, only you can.”

“I know, Mom. God. If anyone makes me feel insecure, it is your and Linda’s constant pestering.” I pushed her hand away. “You better go easy on Chess. I don’t want this to end up like what happened with my prom date.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” My mother sniffed.

“I mean it.” I pointed a finger at her. “We aren’t dating, so get that thought out of your head. I will not have you interrogating him. He is just a friend.”

My mother smirked. “Well, if all of your friends look at you the way that delicious male specimen does, then you have been holding out on your old mother. Why if I was ten years younger, I’d—”

“Ew. Mom, really? TMI.” My mouth twisted in disgust.

“Well, you can be safe and assured that there will be no interrogation,” she continued, opening the front door. “I’ll leave you to your friend then. I’ll see you on Sunday.”

“Bye, Mom.” I rolled my eyes and closed the door tight behind her.

“Well, that was entertaining,” Chess purred from the kitchen door.

“For you, maybe.” I threw myself on the couch and covered my eyes with my arm. “I’d rather have a root canal without the numbing agent.”

The couch shifted beside me as Chess sat down next to me. I let my arm fall to give him a curious look. He had dropped the glamour as soon as my mother had left, and his tail was whipping back and forth like it had something it needed to get out.

“Yes?”

“What is your family like?”

I leaned my head back against the couch and shrugged. “You know, like any other family. My sister is a pain, has always been Miss Perfect, so, of course, I get compared to her in every way.”

“Perfect?” He arched his brow, leaning into me. “I don’t know how she could ever be more perfect than you.”

“Hold on, Romeo.” I gave an uncomfortable chuckle.

“Romeo?” He cocked his head to the side.

Oh, right. He probably had never heard of Shakespeare or any other references from the human world.

“Never mind.” I shook my head. “Anyway, my dad’s great. He’s what the business world calls a fixer. He goes into a company that is sinking and crunches the numbers until he comes up with a plan that pulls them out of hot water and into the Fortune 500.” I glanced at Chess. He nodded in a polite manner. I frowned. God, I was lame. “He’s my best friend,” I finished, trying to pull the conversation out of the snooze zone. “And, my mom, well, you met her.” I chuckled in an apologetic manner.

“They sound wonderful,” Chess said absently as he played with the ends of my hair.

“What about you?” I moved away, drawing his gaze up to me. “What’s your family like?”

At that moment, something passed in his eyes, dark and a bit sad, before a lopsided grin covered his face. “Same as any other family, I suppose. But more importantly...” he paused for emphasis. “About this friend thing.”

His fingers found their way back into my hair.

“Yeah. What about it?” I closed my eyes and tried not to moan at the way his digits massaged my scalp. If he kept doing that, he might very well move up from friend to Master of Kat.

“Does it come with any perks?”

“Perks?” I popped an eye open to look at him. “What kind of perks?”

He gave me a sultry smirk and tugged me closer. “The friendly kind.”

I squeaked out, ‘Oh!’ and then his mouth covered mine. Unlike his other kisses, which were meant to seduce and consume, this one seemed more like he was trying to lose himself in me. As if talking about his family made him need reassurance that he was really there and he was all right. I told myself that was why I let him kiss me. That the reason I dug my fingers into his hair and pulled him closer was because he needed this, not because I did.

He groaned and cupped my hip to bring me closer. He kept his hands on my waist, not creeping up or down, as he was perfectly content to continue ravishing my mouth in slow and sure movements. It was different but mildly unsatisfying.

The part of me that had given in and decided this was a good idea, that we wanted—no, needed—this, wasn’t happy with the gentle nips and sliding of our mouths together. It needed more. I arched my back to try to get him to take the hint, but he only held my face in his hand, changing the angle of our kiss so as not to nick my tongue on his teeth.

Growling in frustration, I took matters into my own hands. I used my weight to push back against him until I was leaning over him and then threw one leg onto the other side of him. Sitting astride his lap, I could feel every inch of him pressed between my legs. My hands tightened on his hair so I could get just a bit closer.

He moved his hands down to my hips, pressing me down against him as if knowing just what I needed from him. When he began to move my hips back and forth against his, he pulled his mouth away from mine. My eyes fluttered open and met his as small zings where our hips touched moved through me.

When I couldn’t seem to get the right amount of friction, my hand went to the waist of his pants. Just as my hands found the skin of his stomach underneath his shirt, a throat cleared behind me. I froze in place. With my hands still on Chess’ delectable abs, I looked over my shoulder to see Mop’s disapproving frown.

I moved to get up, but he held up his hands. “Oh no, don’t be stoppin’ on me account. I just be here to let the cat know they be wantin’ him at Court. But please continue, I be sure they’ll wait.” He waved his hands at us

to finish before darting back into the kitchen, and I assumed through the back door. What was that all about?



Chapter 8

Old Friends

I HAD TO admit I was sad when our make-out session turned dry humping got interrupted, and Chess left for his mysterious meeting in court. He didn't say which court, but I had a sneaky suspicion it was my mother calling him once again.

So, while Chess was away and Mop and Trip were doing God knew what, I decided to work on my glamour by myself. I just hoped Dorian kept busy doing whatever he was doing and left me alone. I hadn't seen hide or feather of him since the confrontation with Chess. Not that I was complaining, but losing my constant shadow was worrying, especially with the Shadow man on the loose.

The only mirror I didn't have covered was the one in the bathroom. I figured if Chess couldn't use it as a portal, then the Shadows wouldn't be able to either, or anyone else who decided to pay me a visit. Now that I knew there were others who were like me—well, not like me like me, but of more than one realm—I had to be careful whom I let into my sanctuary. I already had a parade of Fae coming in and out of my house on a whim.

My wet hair hung over my shoulders as I glared in the mirror. The stubborn blue color stared back at me. I had been trying for over an hour to get my eyes to change back to my original Christmas tree green, but the most I had been able to do was give myself a headache.

Before he left, Chess had suggested I find a picture of myself to use as a focal point, but after a quick search of my house and cell phone, I realized I didn't have any pictures of me to use. Apparently, I was really good about not getting my picture taken.

“Argh!” I stomped my foot when I opened my eyes to see blue ones staring back at me again. “I give up.”

I tightened the towel around my top half and marched out of the bathroom into the hallway. I smacked into a solid warm body. My feet slipped. I landed hard my butt and my towel fell open, showing all my goods to the room.

“Well, hello, princess,” said a voice I knew all too well from growing up in the Seelie Court.

I snatched my towel up from the ground and covered the ladies while glaring at the blonde intruder. “What the fuck, Jewels?”

I’d last seen Jewels at my own mourning party. Now, here he stood in my grandmother’s hallway, thankfully more clothed than the last time. He was still shirtless, the barbells in his nipples glinted in the hall light, but the pants and boots were a far cry from the Speedo he wore the last time I saw him.

“Jewels? What are you doing?” Another familiar voice called out behind him. “Did you find her?”

“I found her all right.” He leered at me, and I tightened my grip on the towel from my place on the floor.

“What do you mean?” Gab, the female equivalent of Jewels, appeared in the hallway. She glanced at her brother and when she saw me on the floor, shoved him out of the way. “Geez. What the hell is your problem? Here.”

She held her hand out to me. A part of me was thrilled to see her. The part that remembered all the good times we had as best friends in my former life. She had been there for me when I came into my powers the first time. She had also been the one who pushed me to give my new fiancé a chance. Not that my Fae-self had any qualms about getting with the broody prince who ended up being one hell of a kisser. And it was her I should have run to when I caught said Prince in the arms of the fake me.

Her outstretched hand said more than words could ever. Funny, considering Gab’s was the one person in the whole Underground who didn’t know the word quiet. I hesitated, wondering which version of Gab was offering me help.

“Come on, I swear no funny business.” She gave me a small, hesitant smile as if she was just as unsure as I was by her presence.

I slid my hand into hers and let her pull me to my feet. Keeping a firm grip on my towel, I swept into my room and slammed the door without a word. I dug through my pile of clothes on the ground, grabbing the first shirt and shorts I could find. While I was in the process of putting them on, a not so subtle argument broke out between the twins.

“Look what you did,” Gab hissed from the other side of the door.

“I didn’t do anything. She ran into me.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have been ogling at her. She’s human now. They’re more self-conscious than we are.”

A smack sounded which was surely Gab whacking her brother over the head like she used to.

And like when we were younger, he only chuckled in response. “I don’t know why. Even as a human, I would still like to lick every inch of her.”

“Jewels. That’s disgusting.”

“Guys,” I called out, opening the door, “I can hear you.”

Gab rushed forward, shoving her brother out of the way. “Oh, Lynne. I mean Lady. I’m so sorry about Jewels. He’s such an idiot. You know how he is always thinking with his little head. You do remember, don’t you? I don’t really know how this all works with you being you but not you, you know?”

I chuckled at the confusion on her face and led them to the living room. “Yes, I remember.”

“Everything?” Jewels raised his eyebrow, a hopeful gleam in his eyes.

I knew what he hoped I would forget. There was a time, before I became engaged to Dorian that I thought I might end up with Jewels. His name wasn’t Jewels then. Though, in my opinion, Jewels was a far better name than Bastian. Sounded too close to bastard, though that was exactly what he was. A bastard.

One date and all dreams of joining the twin’s family were destroyed. Jewels was one Fae who had no problem trying to take what didn’t belong to him. And, like his sister, he had a problem with the definition of silence; the word *no* did not exist in his thick head.

“What do you think?” I asked him before turning to my maybe-sort-of best friend. “You know, it has been a while since I have been a part of the Seelie Court, but in the human world, it is customary to knock before entering someone’s home.”

Gab’s, or Erydesa as she was once called, frowned and fidgeted in place, not like the confident Fae I knew at all.

I wasn’t exactly what you would call a people person before. I was the one who would rather be in the library or walking the gardens than chatting up the visiting nobles. But Gab’s was different. She lived to be in the spotlight and always tried to drag me into some gathering or another.

It was safe to say my Fae mother didn't exactly approve of Gab's. She wanted me to be out of sight and out of mind, while Gab's was all for showing the world what she had. I had gotten into more than my fair share of trouble because of her, but I wouldn't have had it any other way.

It was hard to believe the same Fae who snuck me out of my room at midnight to go skinny-dipping in the lake just over the palace walls was the same one standing in front of me. The uncertainty in her eyes as she exchanged a look with her brother wasn't someone I was used to seeing.

"We did knock. You didn't answer, and the door was open so we just —"

"Barged in unannounced?" I supplied. I sat on the couch while I let her stew in her own insecurity for a little longer. She was a total bitch to me at the party, so it was only fair to let her feel uncomfortable for a bit.

"No, I mean, yes," she fumbled over her words. Her face colored in a way I had always been jealous of.

After letting an awkward silence fill the room, I let a playful grin creep onto my face and a giggle escape my throat. Soon it turned into a full on laugh, and Gab's joined in after a moment.

"I told you there was nothing to worry about, sis. You two will always be inseparable." Jewels shook his head, his blonde hair whipping around him, but the bitterness in his voice not lost on me.

"Sorry, I couldn't help myself." I held my hand out to Gab's offering her to come sit by me on the couch. Jewels tried to occupy the other half, but I shot a glare at Jewels, and he changed his course to sit in one of the chairs instead.

Gab's sat next to me with a smile, but she shifted in her seat uncomfortably. She didn't seem to know how to act around me.

Sure, I was her long lost best friend from a lifetime ago, but I wasn't the same person before, as I'd made apparent to anyone who would listen. It would be as hard as trying to pick up where Dorian and I had left off, if not harder. Lovers came and went, and there was always that underlying wonder if you would mess up, but friends were forever—especially best friends.

I had never had to pretend with Gab's. She had always accepted me the way I was without trying to change me. Though, we would occasionally fight as friends did, we never let it ruin our friendship, just like I never tried to force her to give up her self-centered ways. That was just Gab's and it

would always be her. With friends like that, you either had to learn to deal with it or move on. I'd learned to deal with it when we were still in diapers. Not that we had diapers back then, but the premise was the same.

I grabbed her hand and pulled it into my lap as I snuggled into her side. While I tried to ignore most of the old part of me, having a friend by my side made me feel better. Safe. Like the world wasn't going to shit and my life wasn't a total mess. I could have sat there and basked in our friendship forever, but after a moment or two of silence, she finally spoke up.

"You're different. But oddly the same," she mused.

"Well, that is bound to happen when one's soul is reincarnated as a different species." I shrugged my shoulders.

"So, what happened to you?" Jewels leaned forward in his chair, the worry on his face gone now.

I frowned at him in thought. How did I explain what occurred to me when I wasn't even sure I knew what transpired? The one person who could answer all my questions had been conveniently silent when I had actually been at its feet. Or roots, for that matter.

That annoying tree had no problem pestering me to come home and hijacking my visions with cryptic messages, but when I was actually in front of it—where it wanted me to be—it was silent. I didn't know if it was because of how wilted and pathetic it had looked, or if it was just being a pain in the ass, but I'd had enough secrets to last me a lifetime.

Gab's squeezed my hand. "How about an easier question?"

I blew out a relieved breath. "Yes, please."

Before Gab's could ask her question, Jewels jumped in again, "What about his highness? What are you going to do about him? Are you going to marry him?"

"Not that it is any of your business, but that is not any easier to answer than how this all happened." I glared at Jewels, who slumped back in his seat with a pout on his face.

"How about we start with what do we call you?" Gab's offered with a small smile. "Do you want to go by Lady? Or your human name? What was it again?"

"Kat. And either one is fine, really. Just don't call me Lynne." I snapped my gaze to Jewels, the warning clear in my eyes. "I have a hard

enough time keeping things straight up here, and it will be an easy reminder that I might be me, but I'm not me." I ended with a lame chuckle.

"I like it. Makes you more like one of us already. Lady it is." Gab's pulled her legs under her and turned on the couch to look at me.

"What?" I asked after she continued to stare at me without speaking.

"You know, you could glamour yourself back to your human look, right?" She cocked her head, picking at the strands of my blonde hair.

"I'm working on it, but it's hard to do in this body." I gave an aggravated sigh. "Nothing seems to work the same way it did when I was in my Fae body. Everything is harder. I couldn't even glamour my eyes to my normal color. I had to be looking at Chess to even get anything to happen at all."

"The half-breed was helping you?" Jewels laughed and, much to my dismay, his sister joined in.

"What's wrong with that?" I looked between them. "He's the only one that was around to help, and I certainly wasn't going to ask you-know-who to teach me."

I didn't know why, but my comment only made them laugh harder.

"I'm sorry." Gab's giggled. "We aren't laughing at you."

"Speak for yourself," Jewels popped in.

Gab's glared at her brother, the blue of her eyes becoming glacial, before turning back to me with an amused smile. "Like I said, we aren't laughing at you. We are laughing at the thought that the half-breed—"

This time, I interrupted her. "Chess."

"Right, Chess." She gave me a curious look but continued on, "It's the thought that he could in any way know what it is like to be a full-blooded Fae."

"But I'm not a full-blooded Fae," I interjected. "I technically have human blood with a Fae soul. Nothing to do with my blood at all, really."

"But you are showing signs of your original full Fae powers, aren't you?"

"Yes, and more are showing up every day. I could probably make things grow on their own if I could figure out how to get my magic to cooperate." I turned my gaze to the back of the house where the garden was.

It would be so much easier to grow my own vegetables if I had a little magic in my arsenal. Not like being able to grow the world's largest tomato

was high on my priority list.

“Well, you can’t very well expect a half-breed to be able to instruct you. It would be like asking a blind man to tell you what color the sky is. He might know what color it is supposed to be, but that doesn’t mean he knows what color it is.”

I was trying hard not to lash out at Gab’s, but every time she said the word *half-breed* my eye twitched. I didn’t know if it was because they were talking about Chess, or because I, myself, could be described as a half-breed. All I did know was that the condescending tone pissed me off more than I could imagine.

“Fine,” I snapped out, cutting Gab’s off mid-rant. “Why don’t you tell me how it’s done, then?”

She pursed her lips in that bitchy way I had only seen aimed at me when we first met in my human form and the few times I snapped at her about her holier-than-thou attitude.

“Look. I’m just trying to help, but if you don’t want it...” She stood from the couch and gestured for Jewels to follow. “We can just go.”

I didn’t move from my seat. She was trying to power play me. I knew she was, and usually, I would just apologize and plead for her to stay, but not this time. I wasn’t a pushover anymore that didn’t like to make waves. Someone who just let the road of life direct her wherever it may. I was the fucking driver this time.

“Maybe you should,” I said evenly.

She paused, her brow crinkled. Her blue eyes locked with her brother, who only shrugged and headed toward the back door. With the bastard out of the way, she turned back to me, her gaze softened.

“Look, Lady.” She brushed her hand through her long hair, the way she did when she was trying to seem confident, but didn’t realize it was her nervous tell. “I know you have a soft spot for the half—I mean Chess—but you can’t expect to learn what you need to know from him. Or expect to get the whole truth about what really happened while you were gone.”

“What really happened?” I asked, ignoring the whole point of our conversation.

“That’s a story for another day. It’s too long to get into, and I have a date to get ready for.” She smoothed her hands down her body. Her pants and trendy top morphed into a form-fitting, ice blue dress that glittered in the light. “How do I look?”

“How did you do that?” I gaped.

She made an impatient sound. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you.” She reached over and pulled me out of my seat. “You are making it too hard. You don’t need to focus, and you don’t need to build your magic up. You don’t remember having to do any of that stuff before, do you?”

I shook my head.

“Exactly. You don’t have to think about it, just make it happen.” She pumped my hands with each word, exciting and unhelpful at the same time.

“Okay.”

Dropping my hands, she primped her hair with her hand. “Well, I have to get going. I’ll stop by again, and we can catch up some more.”

“But what about teaching me to glamour?”

She waved at me. “You’ll be fine. Just remember. Don’t think, just make it happen.” Her hair whipped around her as she sauntered toward the back door. Then she paused. “And don’t trust that cat. He might be a pretty face, but you should know better than anyone else that isn’t always a good thing.”

As she disappeared through the kitchen door, I plopped back down on the couch, lost in my own thoughts. Unfortunately, I did know what she meant, but I doubted she knew anything about the Shadow man, or what lay behind his own pretty face. Her warning about Chess had to be her biased towards half-breeds. There was no way that anything as bad as the Shadow man was hiding behind Chess’ delicious physique. Or, at least, I hoped not.



Chapter 9

Practice

STARING AT MYSELF in the bathroom mirror again, I tried to pump myself up to finally glamour my eyes.

Just do it. Don't think about it. Just do it. I took a few breaths in and then out. Here we go.

I slowly blinked as I thought of what my eyes used to look like. As I opened my eyes, the ice blue of my pupils melted into forest green.

I did it! I couldn't believe I actually did it. I thought Gab's was full of shit when she told me it was just that easy, but the little snort had been right. I had started to believe it was just me, that I was defective in some way and could only use my powers when I was having some kind of emotional breakdown. Though, I knew it wasn't true, because I used it back with the glowing fruit.

Not wanting to dwell on my own misgivings, or get into the never-ending spiral that was the mystery of the talking tree, I tried to focus on the good.

I shook my head with a silly smile. "It was so easy."

"What was that easy?" a voice purred from behind me.

I glanced in the mirror at Chess' leaning form in the bathroom door, and an accomplished smile spread across my face.

"Is anything different?" Whipping around, I fluttered my eyelashes at him.

"Well, I don't know." He uncrossed his arms and sauntered over to me. He was unglamoured again, and his tail swung behind him, adding a bit more swagger to his step. His vest parted with each step, giving me small glimpses of his chest.

He brushed a strand of hair behind my ear. "Nope, still as beautiful as ever."

With his eyes intently focused on mine, my lids fluttered down and then up as my face filled with heat. It was weird how the words were not perverted, or flirty in any way, but still caused my heart to thud hard in my chest. I didn't know how to act around this version of Chess. With most

guys, I'd laugh and push them away in an attempt to hide my reaction, but with him, all I could manage was a giggle.

"My eyes, silly." I bit my lip and glanced back up to meet his gaze, but inwardly smacked myself for sounding like such a ditz. I wasn't one of those girls that used the word *silly*. I hated those girls.

"Oh, those." Chess trailed his clawed finger along the arch of my cheek. "I see you've been practicing."

"A little bit." I cleared my throat, side stepping him and exiting the bathroom, hoping he didn't catch my half-truth. I seemed to always be getting caught in my towel, and a small cloth was not a good idea around the frisky feline.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" I asked over my shoulder as I delved through my clothes.

"It's Sunday, remember?"

It was Sunday, and that meant dinner with the family. Back in New York, I would be curled up on the couch with some Chinese food and binge watching the latest paranormal series that included ripped guys who didn't wear their shirt most of the time. In Iowa, though, Sunday dinner was an affair that yoga pants and Thursday's T-shirt would get me a lecture about until I gave into my mother's urging to wear one of her dresses.

Changing directions, I pulled open the closet door and rummaged through the clothes that had fallen to the bottom. I grabbed the least wrinkled dress and turned back to Chess.

"You aren't being honest, Kat," he said, sounding hurt.

I frowned, my stomach tightened in knots. I didn't think repeating what happened with my old friends would be a good idea, not only because I didn't want to injure Chess' feelings, but because I didn't want to have the conversation about what my relationship with them before was like. So I did what Fae did best: be evasive as fuck.

"I just did it." I threw the dress on the bed, a dark blue t-shirt style that would hit me just below mid-thigh. It happened to be the only dress my mother wouldn't give me crap about and still wasn't too girly for my tastes.

"I see." Chess spread himself out on my bed, looking very much at home, and too perfect in my room. He fingered the dress while he watched me carefully.

Avoiding his gaze, I went in search of a pair of acceptable shoes. In most cases, I would have gone straight for the flats. For some reason, my

hands landed on the only pair of heels I owned instead.

They weren't expensive by any means. They were black with a low, two-inch heel and a strap that wrapped around my ankle. They weren't 'fuck me heels' by society standards, but I'd never had any complaints.

"I suppose the scent of a certain pair of twins I caught on my way in had nothing to do with it?" his voice was dark and sensual but had a bite to it that made me wince.

"You can't wear that." I attempted to evade his question as I slipped the dress over my head and the towel.

Though, the mirror was still covered by a sheet, I could see a faint outline of Chess as he moved from the bed. I let the towel pool at my feet as a pair of strong, warm arms wrapped around me.

"You don't need to hide from me, Kat," he murmured in my hair. "I know what those in both courts say about my kind. I've had time to get used to it. So, do not worry about sparing my feelings."

"Doesn't mean it is right," I countered, acutely aware of how naked I was underneath the dress.

"Right or wrong. What does it matter? It is what it is, and there is no use in worrying your pretty little head about it now." He gave me a squeeze and released me without more than a slight caress.

The air rippled around me as it did when magic was afoot, and I stepped out of the towel at my feet to see what had happened.

"How do I look?" he asked.

With his glamour back in place, Chess no longer had his adorable ears. His pink hair was braided and blond and it lay across his shoulder. His bare chest was covered with a dark plum colored button-up and was tucked into a pair of black dress pants with matching dress shoes. He looked normal, and yet still, otherworldly.

"Well?" He inclined his head to the side, a small grin on his face displaying the lack of fangs in his mouth.

"You look like you stepped out of one of those fashion magazines." Just then, my gaze caught sight of said magazine sitting on the floor by the bed. It was opened up to a page showing a male model with the exact same outfit, though Chess wore it infinitely better. "You did jack that from a magazine! Isn't that cheating?"

He gave an elegant shrug. "I only used what was at my disposal. Do you not like it?"

He grabbed my hand, pulling me to him as I tried to turn for the door. Instead of touching the cloth of his new shirt, I felt the warm skin of his chest. To make matters worse on my rising pulse, his invisible tail whipped out and slid up the length of my legs beneath my dress. It wasn't like I wasn't used to him groping me, but not seeing it when I could feel it made it so much creepier, and yet weirdly exciting. It was going to be one of those kinds of nights, I could already tell.

When his tail got too close to my bare butt, I pulled myself away from his grasp without answering his question. Grabbing a pair of underwear from the laundry pile, I inelegantly pulled them on while he watched with laughter in his eyes. Ignoring him, I shoved my feet into my shoes and kneeled down to buckle the straps. When those were done, I grabbed my keys off the nightstand and headed out the door with Chess in tow.

I stepped out onto the front porch, and he made a noise behind me.

"Where are we going?"

I rolled my eyes at him. "To my mom's, of course."

"But how will we be getting there?"

"In my car, of course." I headed to my car.

It wasn't an expensive car: a small, four-door blue sedan that I had driven since high school. It was old, and the stereo system was out of date and crackled sometimes. But it was mine, and mine alone. I had bought it with my own money from my part-time job at Dairy Queen. Not that I had to work—my parents would have been more than happy to buy me a car—but it would have been some extravagant foreign car that cost more than what was normal for a sixteen-year-old's first car should.

Chess snorted behind me, and my hand paused on the door handle.

"What?"

"Why use that when we could use a mirror and be there in no time?"

His voice was arrogant but had an underlying nervousness to it.

"Are you scared, Chess?" A small, teasing smile crept up onto my face.

"No," he snapped. "I just do not see the point of riding in that." He pointed his finger at my car, and I bristled. "We could just as well use magic."

"And where, pray tell, would we come out at?" I crossed my arms; annoyed he was dissing my car. "We don't have mirrors linked up to everyone's houses here, and even if we did, I could imagine all kinds of

trouble coming from people entering without permission. Not to forget, these are humans, it would be weird for us just to pop up in their house unannounced. Besides, I don't think this is about using magic at all. I think you're scared." A delighted glee filled my face. I danced a little jiggle, wiggling my hips back and forth, calling out in a singsong voice, "Chess is a big, old, scaredy cat."

"Fine. Let's get in your death trap." He marched past me and shoved himself into my car, slamming the door behind him.

Frowning, I opened the driver side of the car and slid in. Had I taken it too far? I put the key in the ignition and started the engine, glancing at Chess, who was digging his nails into the seat of the car.

"Hey." I grabbed his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Relax. You have nothing to worry about. I'm a great driver."

Dropping his hand, I threw the car into reverse and peeled out of the driveway. Chess yowled in protest, and I tried to repress a chuckle. This was definitely going to be an interesting dinner.



Chapter 10

Sunday Dinner

“THAT WASN’T SO bad, was it?” I asked when we arrived at my parent’s house.

Chess didn’t answer, and I turned to look at him. I tried not to laugh. His hair stood on end and his glamour flickered in place, making his already petrified eyes even more so by the changing of his pupil back and forth from human to feline.

“Chess?” I spoke in a soft voice so as not to spook him. I held my hand out. He turned to look at me, but it was like he didn’t really see me. He blinked over and over, and then he was out the car door, and making his way up to my family’s house.

Jumping out of the car, I hurried after him as fast as my heels would let me. I caught up with him as I made my way up the walkway of the old Victorian style house my mother was so proud of. Keeping history alive, she liked to say. But to me, it was gaudy and screamed, ‘Look how much money we have!’ It was three stories, with way more rooms than anyone needed, let alone an old married couple whose kids were out of the house.

“Chess, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he muttered as we headed up the steps.

I didn’t need Fae senses to tell it was a lie. His shoulders were stiff, and his hands were clenched into fists. I was about to call him out on his bluff when the front door opened to reveal my mother’s housekeeper, Hillary.

Hillary was an older woman whose pale skin was only made paler by her pitch-black hair that had started going white while I was away at college. She had sharp eyes, a grim smile, and eyes that saw everything a little kid did, even when in a different part of the monstrous house.

My sister and I despaired whenever Hillary was tasked with watching us for the day. It meant no playing around, and we’d end up doing more chores than usual. One time, I was in the kitchen trying to sneak a snack when Hillary’s grim voice called out from the third floor.

“Katherine, get out of the kitchen and come help me clean up your disaster of a room.”

I didn’t know how she knew I was in the kitchen, but she always did. I swore it was witchcraft of some kind. Linda and I always got in trouble for doing something we normally wouldn’t have gotten caught with our mother watching us.

Those same sharp eyes penetrated through me now as if she could tell there was more different about me than my hair color.

“Katherine,” she greeted with as much warmth as she could muster.

“Hillary,” I returned with a nod.

“And this is?” She tilted her chin toward Chess.

“Oh.” I placed my hand on his arm. The bare muscle flexed beneath my fingers, reminding me of what hid behind his glamour. “This is my friend, Chess. Mom invited him to dinner.”

Sunday dinner was usually a family affair and only serious boyfriends, or the occasional benefactor my father needed to impress was allowed to join.

Her hawk eyes narrowed in on Chess. He didn’t make any move to defend himself or greet her, so unlike his usual flirty self. It made me worry the car ride had affected him more than I thought.

We waited while Hillary came to her own conclusions, none of which she shared with us. She sniffed and opened the door wider, allowing us into the foyer.

Shutting the door behind us, she gestured toward the door to the right. “Your mother is in the sitting room, and I wouldn’t keep her waiting.”

The last part was more a warning than anything, letting me know my mother was in one of her moods again. I repressed a sigh and hoped she would calm down when she remembered Chess was here.

“Hillary!” My mother’s voice screeched through the house. “Who is at the door? Is that Katherine I hear?”

“Yes, Mom. No need to shout.” I stepped into the sitting room, my shoulders back and ready for a stiff one. Drink, that was.

“There you are.” My mother stood from her seat on the couch next to my sister, Miss Fucking Perfect, and her fiancé, Mister Fucking Perfect. “We were beginning to think you weren’t going to show up again.”

And the first round had begun.

“I couldn’t very well not show up after you asked so nicely.” I smiled sweetly, approaching my chuckling father who sat in his favorite chair by the mantel. “Hi, Daddy.”

I bent down and kissed his cheek.

“Hello, sweetheart.” He wrapped an arm around me in a warm hug.

My father was almost ten years older than my mother and had already begun to bald so much that he had shaved it all off, leaving only his red goatee that was the same shade as my hair. His eyes were the deep forest green that matched mine, except for the age lines that surrounded his. He always had a smile for me and had never once raised a hand or voice at my mother.

He had been my rock in every difficult bump in my life. When I broke up with my first and only boyfriend in high school, he was there to wipe my tears. When Mom was being unbearable, he was there to calm me down from doing something rash. As an actuary, he had more patience than a saint, and I never did find out if being married to my mother was a self-inflicted punishment or not. Though, he swore Mom was more like me when she was younger, I didn’t believe it.

A throat cleared next to me, reminding me of my guest’s presence.

“Katherine, you are being very rude.” My mother latched onto Chess’ arm, pulling him toward a chair.

If she noticed she was touching skin instead of the cloth of his shirt, she didn’t give it away. Chess let himself be seated, and she perched on the arm of the chair. I sat on the arm of my father’s chair and watched my family interact with Chess.

Seeming to notice Chess’ distress, my mother did what she did best—poked at it. “Are you all right, dear? You don’t seem to be yourself?”

Chess glanced up at my mother and offered a weak smile before taking her hand in his, giving it a brush of his lips. “How could I not be with such company surrounding me?”

Linda giggled on the couch. “Where did you find him? He sounds like a fairy prince from one of your books.”

If I was the spitting image of my dad, then Linda was everything that embodied my mother. Blonde hair cropped in a fashionable angled bob and subtle makeup, combined with a smart, pale pink blouse with a matching skirt. Kitten heels completed her ensemble and, to make the image even

more picturesque, her new fiancé, Simon, sat quietly next to her with a polite smile on his face.

I'd only met Simon once before, and he had as much character as a lima bean.

My eyes landed on Chess, and I smirked. "Oh, you know, just something I ordered out of a magazine."

Chess cracked the first real smile since we had gotten in my car.

"So, how did you two get here? Not in that monstrosity you call a car, I hope." My mom asked.

"Hey!" I stood from my seat. "There is nothing wrong with my car. It runs fine."

She ignored me and gave Chess a pitying look. "I hope you at least didn't let her drive. Katherine has many hidden skills, but driving is not one of them."

I ground my teeth at her blatant jab. I watched Chess' face for a reaction to her words, pleading in my eyes. I didn't know how much more of my mother's quips I could take before I blew up the house.

Playing the part of perfect dinner guest, Chess smiled. "I don't know about that. Kat was a wonderful driver. I felt like I could have slept for days knowing I was in her capable hands."

"Yeah in a coma," my sister muttered.

"Linda, I think we've had enough of that," my father, God bless him, said in an easy tone. "Isn't dinner supposed to be ready soon?"

He glanced down at his watch, an old birthday gift I had given to him. It was a Walmart knockoff. My mother had scoffed, but he still wore it every day.

As if knowing he was asking, Hillary stepped into the doorway. "Dinner is served."

"Wonderful." My mother moved from her spot and gestured to the door. "Shall we all adjourn to the dining room?"

As we made our way out of the living room, I grabbed Chess' hand in mine, pulling him behind everyone.

"Thank you," I whispered keeping my eyes downcast.

He squeezed back with one hand and tilted my chin up with the other. "Think nothing of it."

The softness in his eyes made my breath catch. He could be so sweet when he wanted to be. Then his tail took that moment to grope my ass. I

squeaked in surprise. Knocking his invisible tail away, I gave him a chastising glare, though my heart wasn't in it.

As we settled in our seats at the table, Simon cleared his throat.

"So, Chess. That is an unusual name. What exactly is it that you do?"

"Do?" Chess tilted his head to the side in a very cat-like manner.

I hid my smile behind my napkin.

"Excuse Simon." My sister placed her hand on her fiancé's arm. "He means, what is your occupation, your job? You must be some kind of actor or model, right?"

I didn't like the way my sister was assessing Chess. She had that slight hungry look in her eyes that most women got when dealing with him.

"What do I do?" Chess repeated the question back slowly, before giving me a questioning side glance.

I nodded, giving him permission to say whatever he wanted. I was curious to see how he would handle their questions as well. Would he mention the Fae world?

He sat up higher in his seat, giving off a commanding presence that had the rest of the room's occupants leaning in to listen.

"I'm the moderator," he said, matter-of-fact. Most people would have been like 'I'm a doctor' or 'I'm a model,' but Chess in the Fae realm was The Moderator. The one who settled all disputes between the Fae kingdoms.

When I was the princess, we didn't have a moderator. With the UnSeelie Court at fault for my suicide, everything had pretty much defaulted to my mother's decisions, though, sometimes there would be a dispute between the two realms that had to be handled by a third party and that's where Chess came in.

"He's the moderator between two companies and sometimes he handles civil disputes. Isn't that right?" I lifted my brow at him, expecting him to play along.

"Right," he drew out.

"So, how much money does that kind of position pay?" Simon asked.

I almost fell out of my seat.

Maybe I had misjudged this guy. He at least seemed to have some kind of brain in his head and no filter to his mouth. I suddenly couldn't wait until their wedding.

"Simon!" my sister gasped. "You shouldn't ask such things."

While she chastised her fiancé, I could still see that she wanted to know as well.

I reached for the glass to occupy my mouth while I thought of an answer, but Chess beat me to it.

“Oh, quite well. I am provided with an unlimited supply of willing companions to meet my every need.”

I sighed at his response and took a deep drink from my glass. At least one of us knew what was going on.

“And you know the occasional virgin to keep things interesting.”

I started coughing, choking on my tea as it went down the wrong pipe. The cup spilled onto the table and into my lap. A warm hand patted me on the back, but I waved it away, and I drew in a breath.

“Are you all right, dear?” My mother’s concerned voice pulled my attention. “Hillary! Get Katherine a towel for her dress.” She turned her attention back to me. “You’ll want to get that dry cleaned. No need to ruin your only suitable outfit.”

I refrained from rolling my eyes since my throat was still burning, and I turned to Hillary as she held out a towel for me to dry off with.

“It is upsetting, really,” my mother continued, speaking directly to Chess. “She has such a nice figure, but she hides it behind all those frumpy clothes. It’s no wonder she never finds a date.”

“I attract guys just fine, Mom,” I growled, patting my lap with the towel harder than I needed to.

“No suitable ones in any case.” She turned her gaze to Chess as if realizing her mistake. “Of course not you, dear. Katherine certainly lucked out with you. But you should have seen some of the boys she would bring home with her. Remember, Linda?”

My sister gave me an apologetic look and muttered, “I remember.”

My eyes bore holes into my lap as my mother listed out all the boys I had ever brought home. Which wasn’t all that many. I learned quickly not to bring anyone I actually liked to the house, or they’d run for the hills before dinner was ever served. Except for one time.

“And what about that one boy? The one from the south side who lived by the railroad tracks? What was his name?” she mused aloud.

“Eric,” I reluctantly supplied, knowing, and yet dreading, what she was going to say.

“Yes, that was it.” She waved her finger at me. “He was such an attractive boy and had such great manners. It was too bad his family was such heathens. He would have been a great catch otherwise. I hear he went on to work at the mill just like his father. Sad, really.”

Anger pulsed through me, and my magic coursed through my veins. With my mother, my anger always just simmered below the surface. I was surprised it had waited that long to make its presence known. Now that it had, I knew I had to get out of there before I destroyed something important. Like my mother’s face.

I shoved back my chair, startling the whole table. Keeping my eyes down, I muttered an apology to my father as I hurried from the dining room. My mother’s voice called after me, but all I could think about was getting out before my skin exploded.



Chapter 11

Families Are The Worst

I RUSHED FROM the house, the front door slamming behind me. As I stepped off the porch, my heel snapped under me, throwing me toward the ground. I turned sideways to fall on the grass instead of the hard concrete.

The instant my hands touched the ground, my magic seeped out of me and into the lawn. I could physically see the pulse of my magic as it flowed from my hands and into the foliage around me. It was like little tiny green veins of energy were fleeing from me and going into the earth. I watched in amazement as the grass grew several inches longer and tiny flowers sprouted up from the yard.

The only thing that came to my mind was my mother was going to be pissed. She loved a well kept yard. She loved a well kept everything. When she saw that her immaculate yard was now a gardener's nightmare, she was not going to be happy.

A small giggle came out of me. Then that giggle transformed into a full on laugh. A laugh that even to my ears was beginning to sound hysterical.

"Kat," Chess' voice was quiet behind me, but I paid him no attention, my mind high on the magic pulsing out of me. I would have thought using my magic would have tired me out, but all I felt was powerful. Indestructible. Something I had never felt before, but wanted nothing more than to feel again.

"Katherine." His voice was closer now and more forceful.

Again, I didn't answer. I watched the ground beneath me as it grew and changed. What would happen if I forced more of myself into it? With that thought, the green veins turned into thick ropes of power. It surged from me and forced a multitude of flowers and mushrooms not of this world to sprout from their earthly prison.

Even with the new force of power, it wasn't enough. I needed more. I needed to feel the very core of the earth beneath my feet. I needed—

"Lynne!" Chess' use of my Fae name cut through my power hungry haze.

I pulled my hands away from the ground and watched as the newly grown plant life began to wither and die before my eyes. A small part of me wept for the loss, but the other part was in horror of what had happened. I had never been so consumed by my magic as a human or a Fae. As a Fae, I had been limited by the rules of our world. Not as many rules as there were now, but rules that tired one out after a few minutes of full powered magic. The power I had just shown would never have happened in the Fae Realm. At least, not to a full-blooded Fae.

“Come, we should leave before someone sees you.” Chess ushered me toward the car.

Inside, I turned the engine and eased out of the driveway. I only remembered pulling onto the road before we were once again back in front of my grandmother’s small farm house. Just the sight of it caused exhaustion to press down on me.

The driver’s side door opened, and Chess appeared before me. I gazed up at him with weak eyes. The sudden use of all that power had been exhilarating at first, but now I just felt drained. The very act of breathing became a chore itself.

Without asking, Chess slipped his arm under my legs and pulled me into his embrace. My arms automatically wrapped around his neck, and I buried my face in his collar, the smell of him filling my senses. I let him carry me to the house, and then into my bedroom, where he sat me down on the bed as if I was the most fragile thing in the world. Kneeling at my feet, he unhooked my shoes and slipped them off, and then eased my legs onto the bed.

Usually, I was happy with quiet. Too much chatter gave me a headache, but right now, the quiet, more specifically, the quiet coming from the only male in the room, was killing me.

“I’m sorry about that. My mother...” I started, not quite up to defending her. “She’s kind of a bitch, but she does have her moments. Sometimes.”

I gave a weary shrug that even to me was not comforting.

Chess sat next to me on the bed, silently watching my face. I could see the wheels turning behind his sparkling green eyes. When he finally spoke, the words that came out of his mouth were not what I expected.

“You should go back.”

“Back? Back where? To my mom’s?” I scoffed, snuggling down under the covers. “I don’t think so.”

“No.” His voice was small but forceful. “Back to the Underground.”

I sat up from the comfortable blanket cocoon and glared at him.

He pressed his hand against my mouth. “Now before you get upset. Listen for a moment, Kat.”

Frowning at his hand, and half tempted to lick it, I nodded.

“Half-breeds,” he started, “we’re different—from other Fae. As you’ve noticed, we don’t have to obey the same sort of rules that are in place for the rest of our kind. Now, in certain circumstances, this wouldn’t matter since most of us don’t have much power to begin with.”

I opened my mouth to argue against him degrading his own power, but he cut me off.

“Not all of us, but some of us. Those of us that don’t have much power, well, we don’t live long. As you know, the Underground is not a forgiving place, and it seeks to destroy or conquer anything different from it. Now this might not be winning me points on my argument for you to return, but there are benefits to being back in our world.”

He reached his hand up and cupped my face. I watched his eyes for some sort of clue to what he was thinking but didn’t get much. I wished he had dropped his glamour so I could watch the telltale sign of his emotions in his tail and ears.

“What happened today, just now, isn’t something that should have happened.” He lowered his hand from my cheek and stared off into space. “You are more powerful now as a human than you could have ever been as a Fae, and because of that, the limitations you had before won’t be there to stop you.”

This time, I had to speak up, “Why should I need them? I don’t need anyone to tell me when I’ve had enough.”

“Is that how you felt today?” His eyes had a knowing look in them. “Did you feel like you needed to stop?”

“No.” I thought back to how I felt. “I needed more. Like I could do anything. I wanted to do it. I didn’t want to stop.”

“And there lies the problem. We don’t have the fail-safe the full-blooded Fae do. I don’t know the mechanics behind it. Whether it’s brain waves, or just a hiccup in the womb, but what matters is we’re different. We don’t know when we need to pull back from the edge before we start

siphoning others, and then eventually, our own life force. And that is exactly why the Shadows want us so badly.”

The new knowledge did not set well with me. I was a ticking time bomb ready to go off at the first angry fit. Not only that, but if the Shadow man somehow convinced me to join their little cause, they would also have unlimited power to bend to their will. That was something I wasn’t going to let happen.

“Your mother loves you.”

I snorted at his change in topic.

He narrowed his eyes. “She might not be able to show it in the way you want her to, but she does. You are lucky to have a family, any family that would pay you any sort of attention. Whether you want it or not. You happen to have two families. Two families that want you with them, even if it means being something you are not. I know I was the one who urged you to be a dandelion, but maybe being a rose is what you need right now. And what might be safer for everyone involved.”

“Is that what you did?” I argued. “Did what your family wanted you to do so you could fit in?”

A sad, bitter smile crossed his face. “I didn’t have the luxury of that choice.”

Remorse filled me for bringing it up, but I had to know. “Why?”

“Before you were a human, were there many half-breeds?”

I actually hadn’t thought much about it. I knew there were more now than there had been when I was the princess. Sometimes a Fae could mate with a human, or on a rarer occasion, a Seelie with an UnSeelie. But since the amount of Fae children born had declined, I had assumed it was because of all the mixing of the bloods and thought nothing of it.

“Why are there more now than before? I thought Mother wanted to stop all that because it was causing the Fae to become barren.”

Chess gave a disgusted laugh. “Not hardly. You, my dear princess, have it the wrong way around.”

“What do you mean?”

“Crossbreeding with another Fae and the humans was not the problem. The problem was too much inbreeding of the Fae amongst themselves.”

My brows furrowed together in confusion. “Then why wouldn’t they encourage crossbreeding if we needed new blood?”

“Power,” he stated. “Crossbreeding with the humans was lessening the magical pool of power in the Fae realm, and your mother couldn’t have that. So she stopped it.”

“Then why let them do it now? What changed?”

“Oh, she didn’t let them do anything.” He gave a dark chuckle. “After your unfortunate mishap, her plans to conquer the Shadows with the power of the combined realms were squashed. She needed someone that had unlimited power to use against the Shadows, and since she couldn’t get it from you, her own child, she forced it from elsewhere.”

A sick feeling filled me as the words sank in. My mother, the Seelie Queen, had orchestrated the creation of hundreds of half-blooded Fae children, all for the means to conquer the Shadows. While I understood the need to keep the realms safe, forcing the couplings was too much. But what didn’t make sense was if she made her power source, why was the Shadow man still a threat?

“What failed? Why aren’t the Shadows gone?” My eyes flickered toward my mirror as the words left my mouth. The very sound of their name made my skin crawl as if eyes were on me.

“Who knows?” He shrugged before he stood up from his place on the bed and moved to the door.

I could tell he was keeping something from me but didn’t think pushing would be the right answer. He’d tell me when he was ready. He went for the door, and panic rose up in me. The new knowledge coupled with my mother’s words had beaten me down and made me weak and frightened to be in my own head.

“Wait,” I said.

He paused, looking back at me.

“I don’t want to be alone right now.”

He let his glamour melt off him as he made his way back to my side. I shifted over on the bed so he could lie down beside me. Lying next to him in the bed, I was stiff as a board. I had asked him to stay, but I didn’t even know what that meant. Or what he thought it meant.

After a moment or two of awkward silence, he wrapped his arm around me and pulled me to his chest. His finger covered my mouth to any protest.

“Sleep, my dandelion. Just sleep.”

I let the sound of his heart beating against my ear rock me to sleep, but my head was heavy and full of thoughts of magic and darkness to come.



Chapter 12

What's Done In The Dark

THE SOUND OF my name being whispered in my ear tugged me from my sleep. A light wisp of a touch trailed down my arm, and I shivered. I fought to stay in the dream I was having about a certain cat, a tub of rocky road ice cream, and a deliciously cold wrestling match. The voice wasn't having any of it, though. I cracked my eyes open.

I glanced to my right to find Chess still in my bed, curled up in the fetal position, his tail flicking back and forth in his sleep. A small smile played on my face, and I almost lay back down next to him. Something in my peripherals moved. The mirror I kept covered in my bedroom was bare, the sheet nowhere in sight. Creepy smoke spilled off the surface.

The smoke rolled across my ankles when I lowered my feet to the floor. It was cool against my skin but didn't lash out, instead urging me forward toward the mirror.

The mirror reflected the bedroom with Chess' form in my bed, the room darkened by the night shadows. Then the mirror rippled and flowed, flickering between my room and the mushroom town, before finally settling on the orchard.

Stepping up to the mirror, I gazed into it, trying to depict what it was trying to show me. Was it the Shadows finally coming for me to claim their queen? Or something else altogether? I reached my hand up to touch the surface, and as if sensing my movement, the scene changed. Speeding up like a moving car, it zoomed through the trees, ignoring the door to the Between, and aiming for a hidden alcove that was covered by overgrown bushes.

All at once, I knew who was calling out to me. Even though the voice that had said my name wasn't the same voice I had heard before as it tried to coax me back to Iowa, it had the same sense of urgency to it. The same need for me to be there. One thing I had learned out of all my recent adventures was to listen to that voice. So, as the image came to a sudden stop in front of the all-knowing tree, I stepped through the mirror's surface.

My bare feet landed on the dirt ground before the tree. The stone walls that closed it off from the rest of the Underground stood tall and imposing. The area seemed darker, more foreboding than the last time I had been there. No doubt because of the wilted vision of the tree in front of me.

Before the tree hadn't seemed so decrepit, just barren of fruit or leaves. Now, it seemed to bend as if it was too much effort to stand tall. I felt a sudden urge to touch the trunk, as if I could somehow discern what had happened to it.

I moved toward the tree, but a voice resounded around me.

"You have come to us."

I halted, and then stepped back at the voice coming from the tree. Part of me was hoping to finally get some answers, while the other half was mostly wondering where the heck it was talking out of.

"Well, you didn't give me much of a choice." I crossed my arms over my chest. "Do you always hijack people's dreams to talk to them?"

The tree didn't answer for a moment, and then it finally spoke, sounding weaker than before, "We are not long for this world. Speaking through dreams is easier."

"You're dying? But what am I supposed to do? I don't even know how to defeat the Shadows yet." I was beginning to feel a bit screwed over. They were the ones who had brought me here in the first place. The ones who wanted me to 'save them.' Now they were going to go off and die on me without so much as a way to save them? Hell no.

"Our time is coming to an end. We are no longer needed. But your time is still to come. There will be much need for you from both Fae and human alike."

"Yeah, yeah. Everyone loves me. But what am I supposed to do about the Shadows?" Irritation scratched at me.

"All will come to pass in time. You will find your strength but a sacrifice must be made. Debts must be repaid."

"That is not helpful at all!" I cried out. I didn't care if they knew it would be all right. I needed to know what was going to happen. What sacrifice? What debts?

"We help when needed." The sound of their voice became more distant and hollow. I had to strain to hear them at all. I tried to step forward to demand them to tell me what was happening, but the moment my foot moved the scene changed.

I was no longer in the alcove where the tree was withering away but in the middle of a forest. I turned in a circle, frantic to find my way back to the tree. To demand it to give me some answers. With nothing but dark trees surrounding me, I had little choice but to pick a direction and start walking.

“You don’t want to be going that way, Lady,” a familiar voice said behind me.

I spun around to find the Shadow man lounging in Hatter’s chair, where it and the table had not been before.

“You never know what kind of baddies could be lurking in the dark.”

He had traded out his black suit for one of a more eye-catching blue, his feet were propped up on the edge of the table as he leaned back in Hatter’s chair as if he owned it. The curve of the smile on his face caused my skin to crawl. He had that look that tiptoed the line of wanting to fuck me and devour me at the same time. For all I knew, he probably did.

“What am I doing here?” I edged around the other end of the table, where Door Mouse usually sat, to keep a safe distance between us.

“Why to have tea, of course?” He gestured to the table where it had been laid out with a tea set and cookies. My stomach rumbled a thanks when I didn’t see any jellied sandwiches. I’d learned the hard way that I didn’t want any food the UnSeelie had to offer, especially not from the Shadow man.

“Aren’t you going to have a seat?” His lopsided grin only served to raise my hackles more. “There are plenty all around. Pick whichever you like.”

“No, thank you. I think I’ll stand.” I tried to be discrete as I looked around, searching for an exit.

“Sit down, Katherine. It is rude to stand while the rest are seated.” His eyes narrowed on me, a dark glint in his eyes.

“The rest—” I started, but the moment I questioned him, the other chairs at the table filled with dark figures. Each one a different shape and size. One of them vaguely looked rabbit shaped, and I dared not ask whom it was. Instead, taking the coward’s way out, I took the seat at the opposite end that he had conveniently left empty for me.

“There.” He clapped his hands together when I was where he wanted me. “Now, isn’t that better?”

“What do you want?”

Frowning at me, he dropped his legs from the table and leaned forward on his elbows. "We have much to discuss, you and I."

"I don't have anything to say to you." I leaned forward on the table.

"Oh, we think you will want to know what we have to say." The reference to himself as a we, warned me that I was pissing him off enough that the Shadows contained in his corporeal form were getting agitated.

"Fine," I snapped. "But get rid of the freak show. You're not scaring anyone here."

I gestured to the shadowy forms that snapped their heads toward me.

"Now you've hurt their feelings." The Shadow man pouted, his lip protruding in a way that would have been adorable on anyone else, but not him. "Don't you want to see your friends? They so want to see you. They keep screaming it over and over again. It does give me a headache at times." He rubbed his temples to demonstrate his point.

"Then why don't you let them go?"

"Let them go? Why ever would I want to do that?" He stopped rubbing his head and leaned his cheek on one fist as his eyes lingered on the shadowy forms of those he had taken. "Besides, they came to me. I didn't force them to become part of my army. I offered them the same as I offered you."

"You mean you tricked them," I countered.

Just because they agreed didn't mean they knew what they were getting into. Who knew what it was like to be inside the Shadow man? Was it cold? Could they talk? Or were they squished together inside of that body, not able to move or breathe, just suspended there? Unable to die or break free. A shudder ran down my spine.

"No," he barked out. "We offered them love, acceptance, and power. Now they will get all those things and more. Just as you will when you join us. As our queen."

He held his hand out to me across the table, and I felt a new weight on my head and body.

Looking down, my dress from dinner with my mother had transformed into a spaghetti-strapped, silk dress the color of fresh blood. The neckline dipped down between my breasts, but somehow pressed my breast up, as if offering them to the viewer to have a taste. I reached my hand up to touch my head, bringing down a golden crown with enough jewels on it that even the richest man would envy.

While I was examining my new duds, the Shadow man found his way around the table and sat on bended knee next to my chair. He clasped my hand in his, bringing it to his chest so I could feel his beating heart. My skin revolted against me, trying to get away from the wretched feeling and leaving little pinpricks in their wake.

“Katherine, light of my life, freedom of my heart, I have loved you since the moment I saw you. Since you came back to our world. I couldn’t imagine my life, or any life without you. Please make me the happiest Fae in the Underground by being the queen to my king. And I will make sure all of your needs and desires come true.” As he spoke, his magic pressed down on me, drawing my gaze into his, and my body responded against my will. My heart beat faster and my mouth became dry. Neediness fell between my thighs, and they pressed together involuntarily.

I fought against the feeling of love he was forcing on my body and mind. I didn’t love him, and I certainly didn’t want him. I wasn’t even sure he was able to feel love himself. All they were was hatred and loneliness. Love was so far from the feeling I would expect them to feel.

My mouth opened up to scream at him to go to hell, but I found myself with my back flat on the table, and the Shadow man looming above me. My eyes widened as a state of paralysis weighed down my limbs. Why wasn’t my magic coming to my defense?

“I see you need convincing.” His breath was hot on my skin. “We can be so very convincing.”

Lying on top of the table with my hands limp at my sides, I couldn’t do anything but watch when he slid his hand down the column of my neck. My insides screamed as his hand trailed from my neck and dipped down into the front of the dress he had put me in. I felt for my magic, commanding it to do something, anything, to get him away from me. But there was nothing. It was like it was never there to begin with, as if I wasn’t there to begin with. That was when I remembered.

Of course, it wasn’t here, because I wasn’t really here. I was dreaming. He couldn’t reach me in the human world, no matter whose magic he piggybacked onto. He didn’t have the power to break through the wards separating the worlds. Not yet, anyway.

While I tried to keep from vomiting at the feel of his lips sucking on my collarbone, I did the only thing I could think of to get myself out of the dream. My hands wrapped around a fork on the table and stabbed it into the

softest part of my thigh. My eyes pricked with tears, but the room and the Shadow man began to fade away. The anger on his face lingered in my mind, letting me know things between us weren't over.



Chapter 13

Dangerous

I JERKED AWAKE, my hand reached out beside me to find a cold, empty space next to me. Glancing down at the spot on the bed where Chess had been, I frowned. There wasn't a note or any indication of him ever being there. I placed my head in my hands to urge the Marti Gras parade jumping around in there to keep it down. It was worse than a hangover, and I wouldn't wish a power drain on my worst enemy.

At that thought, my eyes drifted to the mirror still hidden by the dark sheet. Goose bumps covered my arms just from thinking about what I had just been through. What was with people hijacking my dreams? It was bad enough I couldn't get away from the Fae in real life, now they had to make it their business to invade my quiet time too? I hadn't even received any of the answers I needed.

And the Shadow man. What was with that proposal? As if a few pretty words and clothing would make me join them. If anyone could use a good dose of power hangover, it was the Shadow man. A big whopping bucket of hangover with a marching band stomping around to scramble his—their—brains.

I shook my head to clear out the weird spiral of crazy that I had launched into and slipped out of bed. I would have to be more careful with my thoughts. Maybe start taking some sleep inducers so I wouldn't dream at all.

Stretching out my aching limbs, I glanced at the alarm clock by my bed. Six thirty. I had plenty of time before I had to be at work. I kept a wide berth between the mirror and myself as I made my way around the bed. My eyes couldn't help but trail back to the empty spot on the mattress.

It was typical, really. What did I expect from a cat? They never followed directions, and they did whatever the hell they wanted to do, regardless of what others thought. I had let my expectations for Chess elevate to that of a normal human and, while he was becoming a good friend, I was finding it hard to trust him at times.

I walked into my bathroom and bypassed the mirror, knowing I probably looked like a crack whore who was in dire need of a fix and turned on the shower. I made sure the water made the bathroom nice and steamy before I stripped off last night's clothes and hopped into the almost scalding water.

The hot liquid soothed away my sore and aching muscles. While I had never experienced a power drain before, I hadn't imagined it would feel like this. Every inch of me felt like it had been run over by a Mac truck. My aches had aches, and though I didn't have any visible injuries, my insides had to be vibrant purple.

Just lifting my arms to wash my hair was a chore, and I thought about forgoing it all together, but every time I feel crappy, I always feel better when I look better. So clean, bouncy hair was a must.

Stepping out of the shower, I toweled my hair off before checking my face in the mirror. Not my normal fabulous complexion, but better than I hoped. I blinked once, and my eyes transformed to the glamoured green. I pursed my lips and had a sudden thought. My drab washed out skin faded into a healthy glow.

"Much better." I nodded to myself in the mirror and walked with a bit of pep in my step to my room.

I threw on a pair of jeans and one of my few nice tops, a pale lavender peasant top that tied at the base of my collarbone and flowed nicely over my hips. I slipped on my go-to, plain black flats and made my way to the kitchen.

When I entered, I stopped short at the sight of a teapot and cup sitting on the little table with a note leaning against it. Taking a cautious step forward, I glanced around the kitchen for any other changes but found none. Who could have left it? Chess?

Standing before the table, I picked up the note. 'Drink me' was all that was written on it in sharp but curvy handwriting that summed up Chess perfectly. Wonderful to look at, but might bite you if you try to pet him.

I sat down at the table and picked up the cooled cup. Bringing it up to my nose, I took a small sniff. A pungent aroma came from the liquid inside.

I jerked back and rubbed my nose to get rid of the smell from my nostrils. I didn't know much about medicines, especially not much of the herbal variety. Whatever was in the tea could be harmful to me, or it could be exactly what I needed, but I had no way of knowing for sure.

Moving from the table with the tea in hand, I made my way over to the sink. I stared down into the pit of the drain and contemplated pouring the tea out. On the one hand, Chess hadn't done anything that could be constituted as harmful. Perverted and slightly grabby, but certainly nothing on the lethal scale. Then again, everyone had been telling me not to trust him. Unfortunately, since none of them were willing to tell me why, I couldn't really count that as a viable reason. There was the chance that the tea might not even be from Chess in the first place, and then that meant I had a whole other set of problems with someone else being in my house.

As I fought back and forth in my mind on whether I should or shouldn't, my back door cracked opened. I really needed to start locking my house.

I tensed for what may lay behind the door. My shoulders sagged with relief seeing it was only Jewels. Then my relief was replaced with irritation.

"You know, it's called knocking. You should try it sometime," I growled, bringing the cup up to my mouth to take a sip of the most disgusting thing I had ever tasted in my life. My face must have portrayed how disgusted I was, because Jewels cocked his head, completely ignoring my complaint.

"What is that?" His nose wrinkled as if he could smell it from there, and for all I knew, he probably could. Even with my newly enhanced senses, my nose still probably wasn't as strong as a full-blooded Fae. A blessing in this situation.

"I think it's a hangover remedy." I looked down at the remaining tea in the cup, before setting it down. Not worth it.

Jewels moved across the room in that way only the Fae seemed to be able to do, as if their feet never touch the ground. I could see through his mesh shirt. The barbells in his nipples had been replaced with hoops with large, blood red gems. When I realized I was staring, I turned away from him and back to the sink.

"What does a princess need with a hangover remedy?"

I could feel his body heat as he stopped uncomfortably close to me, his voice just behind my ear.

I shrugged and turned back around to try to push him away a bit. "Not that it's any of your business, but it isn't really a hangover as much as a power outage."

Understanding filled his eyes. “Ah. Yes, they said that might be something that could happen.”

I narrowed my eyes at his cryptic reply. “What could happen?”

He gave a nonchalant shrug, letting his blond hair curtain his face like he did when we were younger and he was hiding something. But then he peeked out from behind it with a sneaky smile on his face. For some reason, my skin crawled.

“Do you really want to know?” He tried to sound seductive, but it didn’t work as well as it had in the ballroom. Not now that I remembered what he looked like in diapers, and I couldn’t forget the little incident from our one and only date.

“Just tell me.” I gave him a combination of my ‘I’m a librarian and take none of your shit’ and my recently recovered ‘I can have your head in three seconds flat’ glare.

He blew out an irritated breath. “Geez, you’re no fun. I think I liked it better when you were just a silly little human.”

“Well, I’m not just a silly little human. I’m your princess, and you will do as you are asked. What are they saying about me?”

“Hey, don’t get your panties in a twist.” He held his hands up in defense. “And it’s kind of hypocritical to say you don’t want to be our princess, and then try to throw it in my face like that, don’t you think?”

“Jewels,” I ground out.

“Fine.” The word snapped like a rubber band. I leaned back as he placed one hand on each side of the counter, effectively blocking me in. “You want to know what all the little Faelings are saying behind your back? You want to know what everyone is keeping from you?”

“Yes.” I didn’t yell at him to move back, afraid it would make him clam up when I was finally going to get some answers.

He leaned into me, close enough for me to see the pale lashes surrounding his eyes, and then without warning, I was drowning. My knees became weak, and my breath caught as his Fae mojo pressed down on me. I had only been on the receiving end of his and Dorian’s pheromones a couple of times, and both times they hadn’t been trying to do more than intimidate me. Jewels’ had been more involuntary than Dorian’s. But now that Jewels knew he could use it against me, he pushed it full force onto my human senses until I was a wobbly mess of hormones and need.

“You're dangerous,” he whispered in my ear. A whimper leaked from my mouth. “A half-breed with full-blood power. No rules. No limitations.” His lips ghosted across my cheek, and he cupped my face in his hand, his full gaze pulsing into me. “Any moment, you could lose control. But if you had someone to answer to, someone that could control you...” He pulled my body flush against his, and then slid his hands down to my butt, slightly lifting me against him. My insides quivered at the feel of him while my mind screamed at me to break his hold. “Why, they’d be the most powerful being in this world and the next.”

His mouth grazed mine, and my hands groped his shirt, twisting the fabric with my fists. His hand found the back of my head, and he angled my mouth to claim it, but just as his lips engulfed mine, my body caught up with my mind. I sent my knee straight up into his not so fun bags.

“Is it just me then?” a deep and bitter voice asked.

I tore my eyes away from the bent over bastard clutching his bruised manhood to find Dorian looming in the doorway. Did nobody knock anymore?



Chapter 14

Jealousy Becomes Him

I JUST COULDN'T catch a break. I looked back at Jewels and then to Dorian, my mouth gaping like a fish.

"This isn't what it looks like," I said. "He was—I was—"

"I do not wish to hear your excuses." Dorian's piercing eyes beat down on me, before turning to Jewels who had recovered from his injury. "You. What do you think you are doing here? Do you dare defy your queen's orders?"

Jewels stiffened, and with courage I didn't think the spineless asshole had, glowered in return, "I am doing as our queen instructed."

"I hardly believe molesting her daughter in broad daylight is what she had in mind when she—" He cut off mid-sentence as if remembering I was in the room.

"When she what?" I was over trying to defend myself to him. He, like everyone else, was hiding things from me. Important things.

"Nothing," he snapped, glaring at the smirking bastard next to me.

"Oh, I assure you, Lady, it is not nothing," Jewels goaded as if he hadn't just been on the receiving end of my knee. I owed him more than a swift kick in the junk and planned to pay up in full the next chance I got.

I turned on him. "Then you tell me."

Jewels opened his mouth, but before he could get a word out, he was clutching his own throat, an invisible hand lifting him off the ground to hover in the air.

"Tell her and lose your head, boy." The dark, threatening tone filled Dorian's voice, his hand tightened in the air, causing Jewels to make a gurgling noise.

"That's enough," I said. While the asshole deserved many things, strangulation and beheading being two of them, I didn't have the time or the patience to clean up a mess that big.

"You would defend this boy?" Dorian's eyes locked onto me, his anger bearing down on me. "Are your affections so easily tossed from one man to another, or does your human part simply open its legs to anyone?"

He did not just say that. I couldn't believe my ears or my eyes for that matter. He had not only walked in on me kneeling Jewels, which he didn't bother letting me explain, but he thought my human feelings were flighty?

I could sense my magic begin to wake beneath my skin. All feelings of weakness from last night's overload were gone in an instant. In its place were the telltale signs of my anger building itself into a fit of epic proportions. If he thought my destroying the kitchen was bad before, the things I could do now that I knew what I was doing—well, sort of knew what I was doing—I could wipe him off the face of the Earth with little more than a flick of my finger.

"How dare you," my voice came out low, dangerous, and full of power. "How dare you walk into my house and insult me. Talk as if I am not here and lie to my face."

"I—"

"I'm talking," I cut him off, using my powers to push him back a bit, breaking his connection to Jewels.

Jewels fell over, gasping. Then he stumbled forward and took off out the back door.

Coward.

With the bastard out of the way, it was just Dorian and I. Once again, like a few days ago, we were alone in my little kitchen about to fight. It seemed all we did was fight now. Though, I had been trying to keep my Fae life separate from my human one, it seemed parts of her kept creeping in. That part of me still wanted Dorian's approval.

I could remember a time where I thought we would never disagree. That we would always think as one, but back then I had assumed a lot of things. Thoughts of what we once were, what we once had, were like a bucket of ice water to my fiery anger.

It was easy for me to get angry, to act like he didn't matter, because those feelings weren't what they were anymore, but for him, they were as real as the day I died. They were etched on his soul as a reminder that he failed, and I was the price for that failure. Though it had been a misunderstanding, my forgiveness only went so far.

So instead of fighting, instead of letting my magic unleash upon my already beaten kitchen, I took a deep breath and let it out. I turned back to my tea. My disgusting, cold, tea that I was going to swallow every sip of if it killed me.

While I chugged the vile liquid, Dorian had the good smarts to keep silent, but his presence loomed in the background, ever present and alive. I couldn't forget him even if I wanted to.

I set down the now empty teacup.

"We can't keep doing this," I murmured and turned back to him, weariness in my eyes. "I can't keep doing this."

"You don't have to." He took two large steps over to me, grasping my hands in his. "Come back to the Underground. Where it is safe, and you can forget all of this." He waved his hand around the room. "You do not even have to go back to the Seelie Court. You could just come back to the UnSeelie Court. I am sure mother would be thrilled to have you amongst us."

I quirked my eyebrow at him.

"Or not," he added quickly. "You could stay anywhere. Anywhere you want. At Seer's or at that Opalaught's home. Just come back to us."

The thought of staying with Seer was not a pleasant one. While the blue skinned, blue haired pixie had her fair share of powers and would be better company than any troll, the thought of so many hands to watch out for kind of put a damper on things. Not to forget the constant smoking.

Trip, on the other hand, sounded like a better idea. I loved the little white devil, but he was one of those friends that you could only take so much in one setting before you needed to go away for a while. Far, far away.

Neither of the options would work, if I was even considering going back in the first place, which I wasn't.

"I don't mean I'm done being here." I removed my hands from his and locked eyes with him, to show how serious I was being. "I mean...this." I gestured between us. "Us."

"I do not understand." He tilted his head, his hair falling over the stagnant markings on his face, making him more handsome than ever.

"I know you don't, and that is the problem." I blew out an exasperated sigh. "I can't figure out who I am. Who I need to be with you here. Everyone wants me to come back."

"For your safety," he interjected.

"Right," I drawled out. "For my protection and because my mother doesn't want my unpoliced powers to get into the wrong hands. Which would be anyone but her."

Dorian eyes cast down at my revelation.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what she wanted. While beating the Shadows was all good and well, she wanted more than that from me. What she wanted that power for I didn't know, but I was sure it was more than I was willing to give.

"She only wants what is best for the kingdom, like she always has." Dorian's attempt to defend her would have been endearing had I not been trying to break up with him.

"My mother aside." I took a deep breath to steady my heart that was breaking by the minute. "I don't want to see you hanging around anymore."

"You do not want to see me?" His eyes filled with hurt and confusion and my aching heart sang for him.

"Not don't. Can't," I corrected myself. "Seeing you is hard. While I have forgiven you for what you did, I know it was a trick and everything; it doesn't change how I feel. How I felt. And having you here now, constantly trying to get me back when I don't know enough about me to know how I feel about anything, makes it that much harder."

"What are you trying to say, L—Kat?"

I smiled slightly at his catch. "See, you still see me as the girl you fell in love with. Even with a different face, you can't see past that. And while part of me does love you..." My chest ached a bit more when his eyes filled with joy. "That part is buried under all the baggage between us and the rest of the worlds. So, what I'm saying is that I need space."

He was quiet as he tried to comprehend my words. "Space?"

"Yes. Space."

"All right." He nodded his head. "I will keep my distance, but if that cat comes back I'll—"

"Do nothing because you won't be here," I interjected.

"Where will I be if not here?" He seemed genuinely confused as if the concept of giving me space was something he had never heard of.

"You will be home. In the Underground, spending time with your mother who you haven't seen in years and taking care of your realm," I offered up, hoping reminding him of his duties would somehow make what I was saying easier to swallow.

"And while I am there, you will be..."

"Here, in the human world, where I live."

He frowned hard. "But it is not safe here. What if the Shadows get over and come for you?"

"Then it is a good thing I am some all powerful half-breed, right? Plus, Chess will be here, and I highly doubt that will happen, anyway." I shrugged.

"So, that's it, is it?" His voice lost the understanding tone and turned malicious.

"What?" I stared up at him, confused.

"You just want me out of the way to be with him." He grabbed me by the shoulders, his grip bit into my skin. "Tell me, do you talk of all the Fae who have come to him as payment for his servitude? Do you curl up in your bed while he regales you with tales of his mass orgies?"

I gaped at him, not really believing the words that were coming out of his mouth. How could he flip suddenly from one emotion to the next? I had thought the spell on him was broken, and he would be his old charming self. Maybe the spell had only been a part of it, and this was the real him I saw now.

"Tell me what do I have to do to get you to give me a chance?" His grip was hurting now. He pulled me against him and jerked my face up to look into his eyes.

I knew what he was going to do the moment our eyes locked. I prepared for the pressure that came with his gaze, the pressure that was my body telling me he was trying to use his pheromones to control me. I hoped he wouldn't. I hoped I was right, that he was better than Jewels. I didn't push him away because a part of me wanted to know. Needed to know if he had fallen that far.

So, when my heart rate sped up and my thighs clenched, my heart sank into my stomach. I wasn't the only one who had changed. This wasn't my Dorian anymore. Either time, or the spell, had wrought their vengeance on him, and he was too weak of a Fae to resist the pull into insanity. I wanted to be angry with him. The logical side of me told me I should be, but all I felt was numb.

My magic shot a little spark out, enough to break his hold on me. He gaped and held his hands up in midair as if he couldn't believe I had stopped him. I took a step away from him and then another until I was at the kitchen door leading to the living room.

I gave him one last look, one that was full of regrets and wishes for happier times. And then all of the love that had lingered in my heart for the man I once knew faded away.

“Goodbye, Dorian.”

I didn't have time for past loves. Or for regrets. All my focus had to be on the here and now. And the enemy I knew wasn't going to wait much longer for me to make my move.



Chapter 15

Fucking Faeries

THE MOMENT I stepped into the library at five past ten, Brandi was all over me.

“You’re late.” She crossed her arms over her primly pressed blouse, and her brows scrunched down as she frowned at me.

“I know. Sorry, time got away from me,” I called over my shoulder as I passed by her to head to the main circulation desk. I could feel Brandi’s eyes drilling holes in my back as I put my bag up and clocked in. I waited for her to say her piece.

“If that boyfriend of yours is making you late, you might want to rethink your priorities before you don’t have a job to come back to.”

I looked over to where Mrs. Jenkins was already set up at her computer and rolled my eyes before turning back to Brandi. “I’ll get right on that.”

Apparently, I didn’t hide my sarcasm well enough, because her frown deepened and then morphed into a smirk. “David called in sick, so you’re on nonfiction today.”

I tried to suppress my groan.

The library was broken up into four sections. The main circulation desk, which was the first and last place people saw as they maneuvered the library. Usually, Mrs. Jenkins and I worked that desk. It was the busiest part of the library, and usually, that meant time went by quicker. With Mrs. Jenkins as my wing woman, it made the day just a little bit more bearable and a lot more entertaining.

After the main desk was the children’s section, where a petite brunette named Tammy worked. She had a sweet smile and more patience than the Pope. I hadn’t really ever thought of having children, but just walking by the children’s section would deter me from having them anytime soon.

The second floor wasn’t quite as busy as the first floor, since all the fiction books and movie rentals were downstairs. This floor had the computer center where a nerdy guy with glasses that spent way too much time at the gym worked. I hadn’t gotten his name yet. He kind of kept to

himself, and really, he just freaked me out. If you'd ever seen him catch someone trying to watch porn on the library's Internet you would be scared too.

Beside the computer center, there was the Teen Center, where all the manga and young adult books lived. They also had a closed off room for teen nights and had video games and Magic card fights. I wished they'd had that kind of stuff when I was a teen, then again, I probably wouldn't have come, anyway. People and such. But being in the teen section was only the second place you didn't want to end up. Who wanted to referee a bunch of horny, rambunctious teens?

Lastly, there was the nonfiction desk. Technically it was in the middle of the second floor between the computer center and the teen center with the nonfiction section split up around the rest of the space. But for lack of imagination, we called it the nonfiction desk.

No one liked working that desk. Why? Because it was boring as fuck. Unless you got a huge influx of students needing a reference for their school project, which never happened with the card system on the computer, you pretty much sat there twiddling your thumbs and catching up on your reading. The occasional cart of books would need to be shelved, but that was the most excitement you could expect from it. Which was the exact amount of excitement I gave Brandi.

"Who's going to help Mrs. Jenkins? Can't what's his face watch both?" I gave her a closed mouth smile, hoping to get out of it.

"No," she snapped. "Henry cannot watch both. He has a hard enough time with the section he has. Besides, could you imagine him working with actual people?" She didn't wait for my response before continuing, "That is a lawsuit waiting to happen. I will help Mrs. Jenkins today, and you can handle nonfiction since you have so much on your mind to think about nowadays."

"Great." I hoped she didn't hear the sarcasm dripping from my words. I gave Mrs. Jenkins an apologetic smile and mouthed good luck.

She shooed me away. "Don't you worry about me, girl. I've been managing this desk for years even without help. I'll catch up with you later, and you can tell me all about this new boyfriend the boss lady here has been droning on about."

A smile crept up onto my face, but I stifled it when Brandi shot Mrs. Jenkins a warning look. Apparently, Chess had left an impression, and a big

one, at that. Too bad he was nowhere to be found. I could have used his help this morning. Though, with the way things were going, he might have been more hindrance than help.

I grabbed my bag and phone and pointed a thumb toward the stairs. “Well, I’m going to head up then. If you need anything, you know where I’ll be.”

But all that didn’t compare to having to work the front desk with Brandi. I would rather be bored out of my mind than listen to her drone on about the latest gossip going on in her little clique. I was lucky to have gotten away without her making some back ass comment about my eyes being back to normal. I could only hope that I could keep the glamour up, and no magical hiccups would come my way.

Though, several long and torturous hours later, I was dying for a magical hiccup. I was so bored. You would think in a library full of books, I would be able to find something to keep me entertained in between shelving, and the rare and random reader needing help finding something, but that wasn’t the case. When you were basically living a fairy tale, it was hard to get into anything else.

So, after lunch, when I couldn’t take it anymore, I found myself in the self-help section. I was bound to find something I could use against my mother—my Fae mother, that was—that would help me stay in the human world while helping her do whatever it was she wanted me to do.

I pulled a few books off the shelf, like *How to Win Any Argument* and *Manipulation 101*, and made my way to the law section to freshen up on moderators and verbal agreements. I’d already paid my dues to Teeth, but I had promised the Shadow man to come back. I needed some leverage on how to go about completing that agreement.

On my way to the law books, I passed the medical section where I stopped when there was a giggle followed by a moan. Great. Just what I needed. I wanted some action, and now I got it. The words *be careful what you wish* for definitely came into play here.

Setting my books down on the nearest table, I prepped myself for what I was about to do. No one liked to be that person. The party pooper who had to break up all the fun with logic and societal rules. I was all for having fun, especially the recreational orgasm inducing kind. But I had never been the adventurous type when it came to sex in public places. Give me a soft bed and easy access to a bathroom for clean up any day.

“God, please let them have their clothes on,” I muttered before rounding the corner of where the sound was coming from.

My eyes half closed in case I came face to face with someone’s butt, or worse, the full Monty, I cleared my throat. Through my eyelashes, I saw an attractive couple, both thankfully clothed, but just a few seconds away from being on top of each other. The girl gave a little squeal. She turned away to, I assumed, put her bra back into place.

“What the hell, man?” The guy asked as he buckled his belt. “Couldn’t you have, you know, just ignored us?”

“Just ignored you?” I crossed my arms over my chest, my eyes fully open as I took them in. “You have to be what? Seventeen?”

“Nineteen.” The boy smirked, so proud of his age.

Only a little bit older, and I already felt like an old woman. Even in Fae years, I was still a baby at a century-and-a-half.

“And you?” I eye the girl that didn’t look older than fifteen.

The girl hesitated, before quietly saying, “Sixteen.”

Frowning hard, I glared at the two. “And you thought the library was a good place to what? Commit statutory rape?”

“Hey!” The nineteen-year-old stepped up to me, trying to intimidate me with his height. “What we do is none of your business, lady.” He grabbed his girlfriend’s hand, giving her a loving smile. “Besides, it’s called the Romeo and Juliet clause. Look it up.”

He glared at me before pulling the girl out of the aisle.

I stood there shocked that the boy could be so loving one moment and then nasty the next. All these flip flop emotions were giving me whiplash. I had a hard enough time controlling my own, let alone dealing with others.

I shook my head, wondering if I should have minded my own business when my eye caught what section we were in. Right there, plain as day, was a sign for sexually transmitted diseases. I started to laugh so hard, I had to put my hand on the shelf to catch myself. It wasn’t really that funny.

With a little bit more pep in my step, I made my way back to my pit of despair. I opened up one of the books I had grabbed and started looking through the index for anything that might help me. A moment later the sixteen-year-old stepped up to my counter.

Glancing up to the blushing teen, I waited for her to speak up.

“I’m sorry about Jeremy.” She thumbed back to where her boyfriend was waiting by the stairs with a scowl on his face. “He’s just upset because

I haven't told my dad about us yet. He really is a good guy." She got that dreamy look on her face that I remembered getting whenever I used to think about Dorian. The very thought of him made my little bit of pep die.

"Do you love him?" I inquired, staring down the boy until he finally glanced away. I smirked inwardly at my small victory.

"Yeah." If possible, she blushed even more.

"And he loves you?"

"Oh, totes!" Her face lit up like the red light district after nine o'clock. It was contagious, and I felt myself beginning to smile in return.

"Then there's no problem. Love may not conquer all, but don't let a silly thing like age or your parents' approval stand in your way." I patted her hand and turned back to my book.

She gave me a huge smile and skipped away.

I almost let it go, but then the little punk boyfriend flipped me the bird.

"And use a condom," I called out.

The few patrons on the floor turned to us, and both the teens bowed their heads and hurried away.

Having done my good deed for the day, I spent the next few hours buried in legalese. By the time eight o'clock rolled around, I felt like my head was full of gibberish. While I had gone to college, nothing prepared me for the extensive terminology from one of the books I had picked up. I had never felt as stupid as I had right then. I had to use a dictionary just to keep up with what they were saying. Maybe if I just threw a few big words at my mother and the Shadow man, I'd confuse them enough to get out of it?

With my arms loaded with books, I made my way downstairs to the main desk where Mrs. Jenkins sat as happy as could be with Brandi nowhere in sight. Giving a curious glance around, I placed my books on the counter and handed her my card.

"Where's the Queen B?" I asked, making sure I put plenty of emphasis on the B part.

Mrs. Jenkins gave a deep chuckle and set about scanning my books out. "That girl didn't last half the day before she snuck away for a business call, and she hasn't come out of the office since." She snorted. "She wouldn't know how to do real work if it bit her in that perfectly lypo'd ass."

"Mrs. Jenkins! Such language," I cried out in mock shock. "Well, I hope it wasn't too bad down here on your own."

I gave her a worried look.

Stacking my books into a neat pile, she shook her head. "Now, don't you be worrying about little old me. You have bigger things to worry about."

"Like what?" I cocked my head, wondering what she could know that I didn't.

"Like that boyfriend of yours, and this identity crisis you seem to be having." She gestured to my blonde hair. "You shouldn't be changing who you are for the sake of those around you."

I grabbed some of my hair and frowned. "I didn't really do it on purpose. It kind of just happened. And he's not my boyfriend."

Mrs. Jenkins' dark eyes narrowed. "Says him? Or you?"

"Both. Neither." I sighed. "We aren't together like that."

"But you'd like to be." This time, her eyes had a knowing gleam to them.

I picked up my books and held them to my chest, trying to think it out. "I don't know. Maybe. I guess. It's complicated."

"Isn't it always?" She chuckled, shaking her head. "Girl, you have a good head on your shoulders, but sometimes you think too much with your big brain and not enough with your lady parts."

"What?" I choked out, thinking I'd heard wrong.

"You heard me. From what I know, this boy of yours is a tasty little morsel, and if you don't grab him up, the boss lady or someone else will gobble him up before you can figure out what you want."

"Just because I lust after him doesn't mean we should be together," I pointed out.

"Well, it's as good a starting point as any." She shrugged. "Life is too short to not take any risks. You might not love him, but if you can tolerate him long enough to get a few orgasms out of it, I say why not take the chance? You might be surprised at what you find out about him and yourself."

Speechless, I could only nod in response. I turned away from the desk and started for the door, my head full of too much information and weirdness for one day.

"And Kat."

"Yes?" I turned back as she made her way around the counter.

She rubbed her arms as if she were cold and glanced up at the skylight where the night sky could be seen, and where the half moon was shining.

“You watch yourself out there tonight. I have a bad feeling something’s coming. Something big.” Her eyes locked onto mine. The dark lines on her face deepened as if she were aging this very moment. “And you will be the center of it.”

I gaped at her, but couldn’t take anymore. I marched out of the library, dead set on getting home. The more I knew about magic and Fae, the more I seemed to find it all around me. Who else could have Fae blood in them? And how long until they were released upon this world?

I made my way to my car, keeping my eyes straight ahead and my keys poised and ready. No sooner had my eyes landed on my car, then I felt it. Something in the air that had the distinct feeling of magic.

I gave a cursory glance around but didn’t see anything until I heard it. Buzzing. Like a dozen tiny wings beating in unison. I didn’t wait to see it. I took off for my car.

My feet pounded on the ground, and my heart thundered against my chest. A familiar war cry called out behind me and tiny hands jerked at my hair. Not letting it deter me, I covered my head with the books and kept going, their laughter piercing my ears.

Fucking faeries.

The buzzing had been wings. Faerie wings. And by the looks of it, the whole fucking horde that had attacked me back in the Veil of the Faeries was here.

They flitted around me, surrounding me on all sides. Dark brown bodies with black hair and even blacker eyes laughed at me. Their thin veiny wings beat behind them as they tried to take me down. I would have thought after my last encounter with the little devils they’d have learned not to mess with me, but it looked like they needed another lesson.

Spinning around on them, I locked eyes with their leader. The faeries jerked on my hair and clothes, their attacks more to irritate than to cause harm. I wasn’t fooled. They seemed harmless to those who didn’t know their game, but I wasn’t waiting around for them to turn those sharp teeth on me.

As I called on my magic, and as the feel of it crept onto my skin, a small look of fear made them hesitate. So they did remember. Good.

Hoping against hope that the magic would do what I wanted, I pushed it to form a bubble around me. Before they could retreat, I shoved it at them causing their tiny bodies to spin away from me with a chorus of screams.

The moment they weren't surrounding me, I flew the last few feet to my car. I jerked open the door and dove inside. Just as I slammed the door shut, several thuds smacked against the window. They sure as hell rebounded fast.

"What the fuck?" I whispered to myself.

How did they get here? Why were they here? Mrs. Jenkins wasn't wrong when she said something was coming, and if these little pests got out of the Underground, there was no telling what else was on its way. I just hoped the world was ready for them, because I sure as hell wasn't.



Chapter 16

ALICE

AS I MADE my way home, pedal to the metal became my new motto. I drove like hell itself was on my heels, and with faeries in the human world, that very well could have been the case.

When I pulled into my driveway, I didn't get out right away. I held my breath, waiting to be attacked once more by flying twigs. When no attack seemed to be coming, I clicked off my car and took a cautious step out. The moment my feet hit the ground, I booked it for the house, not relying on the chance that I might have lost them for good.

I unlocked my door and threw myself inside. My heart beat like a rampant drum as I pushed the door closed and put the lock back in place. Backing away from the door, I took deep calming breaths and tried to get ahold of myself.

There were faeries in the human world. Okay. I could deal with this. It's not like I didn't deal with Fae every day. But why were they here? What would happen when the word spread that there were creatures not of this world running amuck? There would be something on the news by now, wouldn't there?

I turned to switch on my grandmother's only television, a small 32" flat screen that was in dire need of an upgrade, only to smack right into a warm, hard body.

Repressing a scream, I lashed out to attack whoever was in my home.

"Stop. Stop. Don't hurt me," a bell-like voice cried out. A voice I recognized and never thought I'd hear again.

I rushed to the light and flipped it on to reveal Alice Liddell. Her blonde hair was tied back with a blue bow, and her bright blue eyes, filled with unshed tears as they bore down on me. Her usually glamoured dress was back to its old ragged one. Her arms and legs were covered in dirt and scratches as if she had been running through the forest.

"Alice?" I blinked. "What are you doing here?"

"You have to help me." She reached out to me, grabbing my arms. "Please. You have to hide me."

“Hide you? From who?” I shook my head. “Wait. Why are you even here? *How* are you even here?”

Her blue eyes widened in surprise. “You don’t know?”

“Know what?” Even as I asked the question, my heart sank into my stomach. Faeries and Alice? It could hardly be a coincidence.

“The doors,” she stuttered out as if afraid to talk about it.

“What about them?”

“They’re open.” Her voice was hushed as if it was a great secret to be kept—and it was.

The doors between the human world and the Fae world were locked tight and could only be opened by a key, a key that had to be issued to you by the secretary in your respective court. No one got in or out without a key. The sister bird heads usually saw to that.

“What about the sisters? Aren’t they supposed to be in charge of guarding the doors?” I knew the answer before she even said it.

“Gone. Poof. Into thin air.” She let go of my arms and flopped down on the couch, grabbing a tissue from the box on the table in front of her to dab her face. “One day the door was just gone and so were they. No one knows what happened, and everyone has gone insane. Well, more insane than they normally are.”

“Wait, you said the doors were open, not gone.”

“Same thing, really.” She shrugged and blew her nose in an unbelievably ladylike fashion.

“And when you say gone, you mean...?” I sat down next to her, hoping to drag more information out of her.

“Completely blown off their hinges!” Her voice was full of horror, and it made me want to see it for myself, but the thought of leaving my house anytime soon made my palms sweat and a feeling of light-headedness come over me. It wasn’t safe out there for anyone, least of all me.

“Does the Queen know about this? Shouldn’t she have guards on the door to keep people from getting out?”

“Well, of course, she knows, silly, and there are guards there. Not that they do much good, anyhow. The faeries blew right by them and out the door before they could even blink.” She gave a small sneaky smile. “I snuck out with them while the guards were trying to contain them. One benefit of my glamour.”

“So why are you here then? Why come back at all?” I didn’t understand how she could throw her human life away so easily to be a Fae and now come back after all this time.

My question must have struck something in her, because she began to cry again. I grabbed the box of tissues and handed them to her, patting her on the back in a there-there kind of manner. Crying women weren’t my forte, even being a woman myself.

“It’s okay. You’re safe here,” I said. “You can tell me what happened.”

“It’s...it’s just awful.” She hiccupped. “When they found out I had been freed, and that the Shadows were on the loose as well, they came to the conclusion that I had something to do with it. Which is ridiculous!” She jumped up from her seat. “I was stuck in that mirror until you came and released me. You and the Shadow man.” She stopped in front of me, pointing a finger at me, her voice filled with accusation, “You!”

You did this. You let them take corporeal form. It should be you they are after, not me!”

“I didn’t let them do anything,” I snapped, standing. “They tricked me. I have nothing to do with what is going on now. I’ve been here the whole time. I don’t even know what has happened to my own friends. How can I be responsible for the whole Underground?”

“But you are! Don’t you see?” She grabbed me by the arms. Her eyes locked me in place. “You are the only one capable of being responsible for them. The only one powerful enough.”

“That’s ridiculous.” I shook her hands off me. “I can barely keep my glamour up, let alone control a whole other world.”

“I could teach you,” she offered, eagerness to please in her eyes.

“Not like I haven’t heard that before.” Everyone thought they could teach me. Everyone thought that I could save them. I couldn’t even save myself.

“But I must give something in return for keeping me safe,” she insisted.

“No. You don’t.” I sighed, rubbing my head. “This is the human world. You don’t have to give something to get something. It doesn’t work like that. You should remember that much.”

Alice had been human once upon a time, until she fell in love with a neighbor boy called Lewis. He stole her stories of Wonderland for his book and broke her heart. She turned to Fae magic for help, and in turn, caused a

series of events that led to my own demise and her imprisonment. Now she was like me. A half-blood, only not, since her powers were given to her by a mysterious tree with glowing fruit that liked to talk in cryptic riddles. I still had to figure out what was going on with that one.

“But can I still stay here?” She glanced around distaste on her face. “With you?”

“Sure.” I threw my hands up in defeat. “Why not? Here, follow me. I’ll show you the guest room.”

I led her down the hall to one of the few rooms in the tiny house and opened the door, flicking the light switch on and gesturing inside.

“There are linens in the closet and towels in the bathroom, which is down the hall.” I pointed out the bathroom door. “My room is over there, so if you need anything, let me know. Feel free to eat what you want from the kitchen, but be wary, there are a few iron pots I have yet to dispose of. Any questions?”

I watched her face as she took in the tiny room with the small double bed and simple decorations. She stepped inside and spun around in place. When she stopped a few emotions ran across her face, most of them unpleasant, before she gave me a polite smile.

“Well, I believe I will bid you goodnight.” She stopped for a moment and glanced down at her dirty clothes and back to the clean bed. “I don’t suppose you —”

“Have something you can wear? Sure.” I took the few steps to my room and grabbed the top shirt and shorts in my drawers and handed them to her. “Here. Anything else?”

Taking the clothes in her hands, she hugged them to her. “No, I think I’m all right.”

“Good. Well, I don’t know about you but I’m pooped, so I’m heading to bed.” I stretched to show my exhaustion.

“All right,” she said slowly. I turned away to go back to my room, but she called out, and I forced myself not to groan.

“Yes?”

“Thank you. Really. You do not know how much this means to me.”

My eyebrows rose in surprise at her words. I hadn’t expected that from her of all people. Alice was more self-entitled than any royal I knew, and I knew plenty. Or, well, I did.

“You’re welcome.” I nodded back to her.

“Even if it is all your fault,” she muttered after me.

I didn’t respond since she was right. It was my fault, and the guilt was eating me alive. I didn’t know what to do or where to start to fix my problem. For more than once that day, I wished Chess were here. He’d know what to do.



Chapter 17

Cats and Trolls

MY FINGERS TANGLED in the long tresses of the figure above me, the soft texture like silk against my fingertips. My body shuddered when the ends tickled my stomach and breasts with each movement. The caresses were a delightful contrast to the sharp nips of his canines as he made his way down my midsection.

My head fell back, and a gasp ripped from my throat as he settled between my thighs. Ricochets of pleasure tore through my body, and my hips bucked up to meet him. A growl reverberated through me in return, and I spilled over the edge.

“Chess!” I cried out and jerked up from the bed with a gasp, the orgasm startling me from my dream.

I groaned and rubbed my hand over my face before I collapsed back onto my pillow. I lay there, basking in the best sex dream I’d ever had. My mind tried to rationalize why I would even be dreaming about the sexy feline. I felt eyes boring into me.

A growl rumbled across the room, and my eyes locked onto the very Fae I had been dreaming about.

His crystal green eyes were bright in the shadows of my room, in the way only someone with a magical essence could pull off. His body and face were hidden by the darkness. The single window in my bedroom allowed only a tiny bit of light from the moon. While my eyesight was still slowly trying to adjust, the intensity of his gaze as it spread across my upper torso which was barely hidden beneath my thin tank top, made my skin tingle.

Pulling the sheet up over my top half, I cocked my head.

“Chess?” I cleared my throat, trying to get the breathy sound out of my voice as I sat up straighter in bed.

His eyes slid down my sheet-covered chest as if he could see right through it. The remnants of my dream still had me aching, and his attention wasn’t making it any easier to forget. I tried to think of something else, anything else, so as not to give away my need.

“What were you dreaming about, my decadent kitty Kat?” His voice purred as he unwrapped himself from his seat by the wall.

My gaze fell on him as he moved further into the light of the room. All thoughts fled my mind. His hair swept across his bare chest, resting just above his navel. His pants hung low on his hips, the material tight and form fitting, showing all of the strength in his thighs. The vision he made was close enough to the dream version of him that it had parts low inside me tightening in remembrance.

He slithered onto my side of the bed, and I fought the urge to move away from the feral look in his eyes. Chess slid his hand along the length of my arm, sending a trail of heat over my skin in its wake. I couldn't repress a shiver as that hand moved from my arm to slip around my neck, and then up to cup my face in his hands.

I found myself leaning into his touch, the need to have him close too strong to ignore. My eyes fluttered closed, and I let myself enjoy his touch a little bit more. He moved in closer, leaning his top half over mine.

“I think I know what you were dreaming about.” His mouth hovered above mine, brushing so lightly against it before nipping at my bottom lip. I leaned in as he pulled away. “I want to hear you say it.”

I moaned at his teasing words. As his hands found their place on either side of me, my senses filled with nothing but his heady scent. My hand reached up tangling itself in his hair, his strands were just as soft as in my dream. I imagined what they'd feel like against my hot skin.

“Tell me, kitten, and I'll give you what you want,” he purred against my throat as he arched my neck to the side, exposing my throat to him.

He bit at the junction where my neck and shoulder met, and my breath caught in my throat. With a smile, he slid his hand up the line of my thighs.

“You,” I croaked out, unable to hold back anymore.

“Yes? What about me?” He teased, his smile pressing against my skin.

“I was dreaming about you,” I shoved out as I fought to keep my hips on the bed and to keep from forcing his hands where I needed them most.

“Hmmm. And did you miss me, Kat? While I was gone? Or were you too wrapped up in your prince to notice?” His grip tightened on me, the hard sound of his voice was like a splash of cold water to my libido, and I jerked away from him.

“No,” I snapped at him, irritated at my own lack of self-control. “And stay out of my head.”

He gave me an amused smile. “Sadly, dream manipulation has never been one of my gifts, but I did partake in one of Seer’s more interesting gatherings. Mass daydreams can be so satisfying when in the right setting.”

My lips twisted down at the thought of a bunch of Fae sitting around getting high and having mental orgies. I’d been on the receiving end of one of her vision quests, and it didn’t leave me satisfied in the least.

Changing the subject, I drew the covers up around me. “Where were you?”

“Working. Where else?” He shrugged as if it was an everyday occurrence.

“But you left.” I winced at the desperation in my voice. “You weren’t here and...”

My voice broke and all the events of the last few days caught up with me. Tears fell down my face and racking sobs filled my chest.

I curled my hands into fists and clenched the covers to me while trying to hide the agony on my face. My chest felt heavy and full of so many emotions I couldn’t keep them in any longer, but I was never a pretty crier. My face would get blotchy and my nose red and puffy, so much so that I turned my face away from Chess to try to hide it.

“Shh.” He ran his hand through my hair and then stroked my back. “If I had known you would be this upset, I would have woken you first, or at least left a note. Know that I didn’t leave because I wanted to.”

“Then why?” I asked in a small voice, coated with tears.

“A messenger came, and there was business that needed my attention. I didn’t think you would care.” His words had a slightly bitter tone to them.

“I do care,” I retorted. “I mean. We’re friends. I would want to know if you were going to be in danger.”

His cat-like eyes watched me for a moment before he spoke. “Right. Friends. And how is that working out for us?”

I opened my mouth to answer, to say we were fine, but snapped it shut. We weren’t fine. We weren’t even close to fine. The world was falling apart, and I still couldn’t admit that I wanted the Fae in front of me, because of pride, or plain old stubbornness.

Mrs. Jenkins’ words echoed through me. I might not love Chess, but I knew I liked him. I missed him when he was gone. When there was a problem, I thought of what he would do, and like it or not, I was jealous of the other Fae who had been in his bed. And God help me, I wanted him. I

wanted him more than anything in this world or the next. I didn't know much about anything else in my crazy life, but I did know that.

Chess moved away, and I could physically see him closing himself off from me. I had a feeling if that happened; I wouldn't ever get this chance back. If I wanted him, it had to be now.

"We're not." I grabbed his wrist, stopping him from leaving. "Friends, that is."

He glanced down at my hand and back to my face, a cautious look in his eyes. "Then what are we?"

I pulled him down to me and muttered, "Hell if I know," before pressing my mouth to his.

Chess didn't hesitate to cup the back of my head and press me closer to him. Angling my head slightly, I opened my mouth to him and let his slightly rough tongue slide in. Kissing someone with feline qualities, like sharper canines, was a slight challenge. You couldn't really go crazy unless you wanted a tongue piercing. Since I didn't, I let Chess take the lead and found myself so consumed in our kiss that I didn't realize he had laid me back onto the bed until I felt him pressed between my legs.

I pulled back from the kiss with a gasp and then let out a slight groan. We were moving so fast. I mean, I wanted this, but I wasn't sure I wanted this right now. Not with everything that was going on. Especially since I just admitted to myself that I craved him.

"What is it?" He leaned back, watching my face, his eyes still full of desire. "I thought you wanted this."

"I did. I do," I explained, a blush filling my face. "It's just there is so much happening, I don't know if it would be right. Or if it would even be me doing this because I wanted to, or me being so overwhelmed. You know with the Shadows loose, Fae going missing left and right. Then there are the faeries and Alice being in the human world. You know what I mean?"

"Faeries? Alice? Here?" He pulled back as if I had bit him. He stood from the bed and started for the door. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was so distracted by the fact that you were actually back, that I forgot." I pushed away from the bed to go after him. I placed my hand on his arm, stopping him before he could open the door. "And then we were a little preoccupied."

A silly grin filled my face at what had just happened.

He pressed his lips to mine in a soft kiss. "Yes, that we were. But for once, and I cannot believe I am saying this, there are more pressing matters than consummating our new non-friendship."

"You're right."

Chess' eyes darkened. "If Alice and the faeries are here, than others may follow. Others that may want to take matters into their own hands. I have to go back and take care of a few things, make some preparations."

"The Fae are already through, what else is there to prepare for?"

"For all hell to break loose."

Glass shattered behind me as if it'd been waiting for Chess to say those words. I spun around and backed up. My bedroom window had been smashed and was now a big gaping hole. The frame around it had been ripped apart, and in its place, a burly figure loomed over us.

"What is that?" I took a step back, my back bumping into the wall behind me.

Chess tensed up beside me, his eyes focused on the creature. "That, my dear, is a troll."

"That's a troll?" I pointed at what looked to be a supersized man on steroids, with a pig snout for a nose and tusks coming out of his mouth. It wore only a flap over its private areas and dragged a large club behind it, which it now waved in the air with a roar.

"Are you all right in there?" Alice's voice chimed in from behind the door before the doorknob rattled.

"We're fine. Don't come in here." I called out to her. I didn't know what would happen if the troll saw Alice, especially since the rest of the Underground hated her guts. Luckily for me, she actually listened to me this time and moved away from the door.

With Alice gone, Chess leaned over and whispered, "He might not look like much, but believe me, love, you don't want to be getting on this guy's bad side. They're stupid but strong as hell."

Once the troll was done with his war cry, his tiny eyes looked around my room, as if he was a child in a toy store. Not paying us any mind, he stomped his large feet over to a line of rag dolls my grandmother had on display on the dresser.

"What is he doing?" I kept my voice down, trying not to draw the troll's attention.

"I don't know." Chess shrugged. "Why don't you ask him?"

“What?” I scoffed. “I can’t do that, he’ll eat me!”

“That’s silly. Trolls don’t eat beautiful ladies.” Chess smirked at me.

My eyes narrowed in a scowl. How was I supposed to know what trolls ate? I’d never seen one before now. Everything I had ever learned about trolls was from fairy tales. They normally lived under bridges and required you to answer a riddle to get by, but this guy didn’t look like he could spell his own name, let alone spout out a riddle.

“Excuse me.” I cleared my throat and took a hesitant step forward, but the troll’s attention securely focused on the doll he was playing with. I tried again a bit louder this time. “Excuse me.”

The troll glanced toward me with a curious expression, as if he hadn’t known I was even there.

“Hi.” I gave a small wave. “That’s a nice doll you have there.” I pointed to the doll in his hand with a smile. “That belonged to my grandmother, but she’s gone right now, so you could have it if you want.”

He looked to the doll and back to me, clearly confused at the concept.

“It’s a gift,” I offered up, hoping he would know what that meant.

“Gift?” it said in a voice that sounded like he had been gargling rocks.

“Yes. A gift.”

He looked down at the doll, and then to me. When his gaze slid over to Chess, he scowled. “Why?”

I stepped in front of Chess, trying to bring his focus back to me. I didn’t know what his beef was with Chess, but he was talking and not destroying things, and I wanted to keep it that way.

“Because we are friends.” I smiled up at him.

“Friends?” He pointed at himself and then at me.

“Yep. Friends. So as your friend, I have to ask, why did you come through my window?” I gestured toward the hole in my wall.

The troll looked back toward the hole as if not remembering he had been the one to create it. He scratched his head, and I could see him struggling to remember.

“Did you come to see me?” I asked.

“You?” He tilted his head to the side. “Who you?”

“I’m Kat.” I placed my hand on my chest. “Who are you?” I was beginning to feel kind of silly having to dumb down everything I said, but if it kept him happy, I’d even go so far as interruptive dance to get the big lug out of my house.

“Bar,” was his delighted reply.

I raised my eyebrow at the name but didn’t question it. “Well, it is nice to meet you, Bar. Do you remember why you came here? To the human world?”

“Humans?” He tensed up, his eyes on alert. “Where humans?”

Knowing I was going to regret it, I held my hands up. “I’m a human, Bar. And this is Chess, the moderator.”

I gestured to Chess behind me.

“Moderator!” The troll roared, his hand tightening around the doll. He stomped his feet, causing the whole house to shake. “Bar not bad! Not bad.”

Chess stepped out from behind me, his hands on his hips. “I am not here for you, you big lug. But I might be if you don’t stop playing games and tell us why you busted in here.”

Suddenly it was like the lights went on in the troll’s head. Before it was a dim bulb that made me think he had been dropped one too many times as a child, but now there was intelligence there. But also fear.

“The queen wants the human. The queen ask Bar to get human.”

Of course, it was my mother who sent him. I knew she wanted power but to go this far was getting ridiculous.

Chess seemed to figure it out as well and stood in front of me. “The queen will have to wait. I need the human right now.”

“But the queen.” A tiny quiver filled Bar’s voice.

“The queen can answer to me,” Chess’ voice rang with authority that had my insides tingling. “You can go back and tell her what I said, and if she tries to punish you, I will see to it.”

The troll hesitated. Chess obviously had more pull than I thought he did, even if he wasn’t exactly the moderator anymore.

“Go!” Chess’ voice rang out throughout the room.

The troll scrambled back out the way he came, his hands clutching the doll I had given him.

When he was gone, I sighed as I took in the damage to my grandmother’s house. How the hell was I going to explain this? I dragged my hand through my hair and set to work on picking up broken pieces of the wall and putting them into a pile.

“Your mother is getting out of hand.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, focusing on not getting cut by the shards of glass littering the floor.

“All the more reason I need to go.”

My head jerked up. “Go? Now? After I just got attacked? What if he comes back?”

Chess placed his hands on my shoulders and rubbed them in a soothing manner. “You’ll be fine. He won’t come back, believe me.”

“But why was he more scared of you than my mother? You’re not even the moderator anymore.” I leaned into his embrace, accepting his comfort.

“I might not be the moderator anymore, but I still have a certain pull in the Underground. And like you, my power isn’t limited by rules.” He placed his chin on top of my head and stroked my hair. “What worries me is how he got out in the first place?”

I leaned back to see his face. “From what Alice said, the guards aren’t that good at their job, but since he said my mother sent him, I have no doubt that he was probably let out.”

“Which is also a huge problem.” Chess placed his clawed finger under my chin, tipping my head further back. “I won’t let anything happen to you. Not while I’m around, but since I won’t be for the next few days, you need to keep alert to your surroundings. Don’t leave the house for anything other than your job and make Alice pull her weight around here. She might make a horrible Fae, but she still has more control over her magic than you do.”

“I’m not a child. I can take care of myself.” I pouted.

He nipped at my lip with a grin. “I am well aware of that.”

His hands slid their way down my hips and pulled me close. My heart rate sped up.

My eyes fluttered closed as he dipped his head down. His lips engulfed mine, and I opened my mouth to him, savoring his kiss. Each sweep of his tongue caused my insides to light on fire and soon my hands found their way to his shoulders. I pushed myself up on my tiptoes to get closer to him. Just as his hands began to trail further down my hips, the bedroom door slammed open, revealing Alice’s horrified expression.

“What in the name of all that is good happened here?”



AFTER CHESS LEFT, LEAVING me aching to continue where we had left off, I explained to Alice what had gone down. When that was done, I

wanted nothing more than to go back to bed but that wouldn't happen until I fixed the new hole in my wall.

I found a piece of plywood big enough to cover the hole, and though it wasn't the prettiest of jobs, it was enough that I collapsed onto my bed and tried to sleep.

Chess had said he'd only be gone a few days at most, and not to worry, but of course telling me not to worry only made me worry more. So after tossing and turning for about an hour, my senses acutely aware of the hole, I gave up trying to get to sleep.

I made my way to the kitchen, and without turning on the kitchen light, opened the fridge door. The light from the door illuminated the contents of the kitchen and a quiet Alice sitting at the table. My heart leapt into my chest.

"What are you doing sitting in the dark?" I flipped on the kitchen light before turning back to her.

"Thinking." The one word said volumes to what she was thinking about. It was the same thing I had been thinking about since Chess left. The possibility that our worlds, the human and the Fae world, would go to war.

I wanted to believe that the human race was more open minded than that, but with the way we treated our own species, I had little hope that we wouldn't have the strike first and dissect later mentality. It didn't bode well for any Fae or half-breed.

"I don't know what to say to make you feel better, Alice." I opened the freezer and pulled out an ice cream carton. I grabbed two spoons from the drawer and sat down at the table. "Whatever will happen, will happen, but until that time comes, there is nothing that rocky road ice cream can't fix."

"Rocky road?" She cocked her head at the outstretched spoon and the carton in my hand. She took the spoon from me and watched as I peeled the top off the carton to reveal the decadent chocolate, almond, and marshmallow goodness inside.

Digging my spoon in, I took a big bite and simply moaned in delight. Literally, nothing could beat good old ice cream therapy. Okay, maybe a toe curling orgasm or two, but not much else.

Alice dipped the spoon into the carton, pulling out a small amount, and slipping it into her mouth. Her eyes lit up.

"Oh, my! That is good." She placed her hand to her mouth and then dug her spoon in again to get more.

“I told you.” I gave a smug smile as I loaded my spoon with another bite.

She shoveled another spoonful into her mouth, no longer caring if she was ladylike or not. “This is the best thing I’ve ever tasted. How do you not simply spend all day eating these kinds of foods?”

“Well, for one, I would get really fat. Then there is diabetes, heart disease,” I began, “But it’s good for anxiety in a pinch and has been known to heal a broken heart in no time flat.”

She cocked her head to the side. “But if you could eat this and feel so wonderful, why deal with men at all? I know it has been a while, but from the few times I have had relations, while they weren’t altogether unpleasant, if you do not wish for a child, I do not see the point.”

I laughed so hard I snorted. “Relations? You mean sex?”

“Yes, if you must be so crude.” She blushed at the word.

“Sex is not crude by society’s standards. *Fucking* would be crude.” I laughed at the shocked expression on her face. “And if all you can say about your experiences was that they weren’t unpleasant, your partner wasn’t doing it right.”

“I do not understand. How do you not do it right?” Her lip pushed out in a cute confused pout. “I did exactly as my mother instructed when she advised me in preparation to be married. I’ll admit, the first time did hurt quite a bit, but after that, it wasn’t so bad.” She shrugged. “But I have to say, I do not understand what the whole fuss is about.”

I paused, my spoon in midair, and then waved it at her. “There is a lot to fuss about. If you’ve only ever had all right sex, you’ll never know what you are missing. And having bad sex can make or break any relationship.”

“Much has changed since I was in this world. I fear I will never catch up.” She shook her head and scooped another spoonful of icy goodness.

“Oh, Alice. There is so much to tell you. So much to teach you. I don’t even know where to start.” I stopped at that and giggled as I had a naughty thought. “Speaking of not needing men. Let me tell you about this wonderful invention called a vibrator.”



Chapter 18

Mirror, Mirror

IT HAD BEEN several days since Alice and I gorged ourselves on ice cream. Things were beginning to get back to normal. With no new attacks, and no Fae showing up at my doorstep, I felt safe enough to go back to work.

So, while I was slaving away at work, Alice hung out, reacquainting herself with the human world, via reality TV.

“I still don’t understand these silly women. How do they not know who the father of their children is?” Alice asked me the moment I stepped in the door.

She had taken to wearing my clothes instead of her usual tea dress and was lounging about on the couch in a pair of yoga pants that I knew said ‘Bite me’ on the butt and an oversized t-shirt. I had offered her one of my tank tops, but she had looked at me with such horror that I hadn’t offered it again. I would think being around the Fae would make her less of a prude, but apparently, you could give a girl magical powers, but the thought of showing her shoulders was unspeakable.

“I told you to stop watching that crap.” I plopped down on the couch next to her, glaring in disgust at the latest reality talk show she had taken up.

“But they are so interesting. How am I going to learn about this new world if I don’t watch your magic box?” She gestured toward the TV, before grabbing a handful of chips from the bag on the coffee table.

“It’s not magic.” I snatched the bag from her and snagged my own pile of greasy goodness. “It’s science. Electricity, wires, and such.”

“All the same to me.” Alice shrugged her shoulders. The neckline of her shirt fell off, which she yanked back up with a slight blush on her face.

In the last few days, I had taught her about the things she had missed, such as electricity and the Internet.

“Anyway, to answer your question, she doesn’t know because she is a ho,” I said through a mouthful of chips. Nothing like junk food to relieve the stress of a hard day at work.

“And being a garden tool is a bad thing?” Her brow furrowed in confusion.

I gave an impatient sigh. “A ho, as in a loose woman.” I ignored the shocked gasp and continued, “As in someone who has sexual relations with multiple partners without taking the proper precautions.”

“Right,” she said slowly, though I wasn’t sure she actually understood. “Well, this man is definitely the father, they have the same facial structure and everything.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes people only see what they want to see.” I stood from the couch and stretched. “On that note, I’m going to take a bath, holler if you need me.”

“Lady?”

I paused at her voice.

“Have you heard anything or seen any...?”

She trailed off, but I knew what she meant. Had I seen any other Fae in this world? Thankfully, I hadn’t. My day had been unremarkably boring. The only thing that worried me was the lack of a certain feline presence.

I hadn’t seen or heard from Chess since he had left abruptly in the middle of the night. Every time I thought of that time, a smile crept up on my face, and over the last few days, it had happened more often than I’d like to admit.

“No, I haven’t.” The unspoken yet hung in the air.

I made my way to my bedroom for fresh clothing. A nagging worry pressed down on me. Where was he? He had said he needed to make preparations, but what kind of preparations could he make? There were many things I still didn’t know, but I thought he was done keeping secrets. Apparently not.

We didn’t know how the humans would react to the Fae, or if there was even anything to worry about. I’d been watching the news like crazy, and there hadn’t been any state of emergency about unknown creatures as of yet. No doubt if there had been any word, my mother would have been all over my ass to move closer to town, or god forbid, in with her.

I shuddered at the thought as I snatched up my favorite pair of pajamas: a pair of red men’s pajama pants and a black t-shirt that said, ‘I’m here. What are your other two wishes?’ I had found it hilarious at the time, but now knowing how wishing could end with your death, it wasn’t that funny.

As I rummaged around for a clean pair of underwear, I had a vague feeling of being watched. I spun around. My eyes scanned the room. There was no one there. I had felt it. I was sure of it. But I almost shrugged it off when there was a movement. It was small, but there, behind the sheet thrown over my mirror was a figure.

I doubted they could see much into my room, but it didn't make me any less upset about it. Sitting my clothes down, I crept over to the mirror. Snatching up a hammer I had left out after patching up the hole, I held up my other hand to pull back the sheet. I yanked it back.

My mother, Queen of the Seelie Court, stood in the frame, an amused look on her face.

"What did you think you were going to do, human? Beat me to death?" She threw back her head and laughed, the sound of it grated on my nerves.

Standing there in all her splendor, she looked very much the queen she was. A white gown coated her figure, billowing out from mid-thigh and down to the floor. Her white blonde hair was piled up on her head in an extricated hairdo that I would have destroyed in five minutes.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, not beating around the bush. If she was here, it was because she wanted something. I would rather get it out of the way than stand there for hours listening to her pretend to care.

Her ice blue eyes narrowed, and I might have worried, but I was tired and really had no fucks left to give.

"Do not speak to me in such a way, human. I wish to speak to my daughter, bring her to me," she demanded as if it were so simple.

I shook my head. "It doesn't work that way, I'm afraid."

"Do you dare defy me?" She took a step back from the mirror as if appalled that anyone would even think it. The movement allowed me to see the white and gold of the throne room behind her. There was the distinct sound of chatter in the background, letting me know she was not alone.

Resisting the urge to return with a smartass remark, I took a seat on the edge of the bed. I was going to be here a while. Her usually cool and collected face morphed into rage.

"How dare you sit in the presence of your queen? Do you have a death wish, child?" She crossed her arms over her chest, tapping her nails against her arm.

"Mother," I stated in a firm and confident tone. "Please shut up."

"How dare you—"

“Stop,” I snapped, my patience wearing out. “You do not come to my home and demand things of me. I am not the human, and I am not a child. I am the Seelie Princess that was once your daughter but now happens to reside in this human form. Regardless of our relations, you are not in any way my queen.”

I could tell my words were just adding to the flame of her rage, but when she opened her mouth to speak, I cut her off again.

“As I see it, you need me.” I waited for her to deny it, and when she didn’t, I continued, “And while you may keep all the secrets you like from me, the truth of the matter is, you aren’t in any position to demand anything of me.”

“Well, see here now. There are things that must be done, rules that must be obeyed.” For the first time in all my life, I saw fear in her eyes. “Events have already gone far beyond what we believed possible, and much of that I believe is your fault, not that silly little twit everyone else seems to blame.”

“You’re right.” I stood from my seat and approached the mirror. “It’s not her fault, and while some of the blame certainly falls on my shoulders, the base of the blame is all yours, Mother.”

Her eyes widened, and her gaze darted around the room as if she realized an audience wasn’t such a good idea for this conversation. Turning from the mirror, she muttered to a gold-plated guard. He began clearing the room.

“Not him.” She pointed off to the side, and then returned her attention to me, with a suspicious, but worried expression. “What have you heard?”

“Not much, really.” I shrugged.

It was true; I didn’t know a whole lot, most of it was just conjecture I had gotten from the various misleading conversations with the citizens of the Underground. Then there were the visions I’d had with Seer.

Not to mention, the argument I had witnessed between my mother and Mab over what to do about the Shadows and then the tree, the tree that seemed to know everything but gave away so little. I’d give anything for an hour or two with that tree.

My mother waited for me to fill in the blanks. I didn’t want to show her my whole hand, but unless I gave her something, she wasn’t going to move an inch. There wasn’t any time for there to be a stalemate between us.

“You and the UnSeelie Queen had a disagreement over what to do about the ones who are now known as the Shadows.” I paused, and she nodded. “You didn’t want to kill any more of our kind, and so you cast them out into the abyss that is now known as the Shadow Realm. What was it before?”

She hesitated, before indulging me, “A graveyard. What some refer to as the Reaper’s playground.”

“But how did you even get into there? I don’t remember ever seeing anything in my studies about anyone even being able to reach it. It’s not connected to the rest of the realms.”

“Not directly, no.” She pressed her lips together into a fine line as if it pained her to tell me anything about the door. “It took quite a bit of magic and some incantations to make a hole.”

“The door in the Between with the rest?” I thought back to the beaten up door set in the circle with the others and the two-headed sisters that guarded them.

“Yes,” she snapped, and then composed herself. “But now it’s done, and if I could take it back I would, but the fact of the matter is that they are out now and looking for blood. Fae blood.”

“I know. I was there.” My voice was small and a bit ashamed of what I had done.

“So I’ve been told.” Her anger fluttered in the air even through the glass.

Changing the subject off of my failings, I held my hands out. “So, what do I have to do to fix it?”

“It is quite simple.” Her face began to light up.

“Well, if it is that simple, why does it have to be me?” I retorted. “Couldn’t it be any half-blood?”

“No. It cannot.” Her voice was blades on my skin. “It has to be you.”

“Why?”

“As much as I loathe to admit it, you are the only one powerful enough to defeat them.” She looked off to the side, bitterness on her face.

Was my being more powerful than her such a big deal? Knowing my mother, it was a very big deal. Having a weakling for a daughter was something she could handle but one more powerful than her? I was lucky she needed me, or I would have been dead already.

“Fine. What’s the deal? A talisman I have to wave at them at the light of the moon? A sword made by Tibetan blind monks?” I said, naming off a few options I had seen in movies and books.

“Nothing of the sort. A little blood, a few words, and poof. Problem gone. The Shadows no more.” A secret smile curled up her face, telling me she was holding back something.

“All right. Then we should just get it over with then, shouldn’t we? Where are the Shadows at now?” I was suddenly glad I hadn’t gotten ready for bed already and still had some decent clothes on. Not really fighting material, but it would work for this.

“Not so fast.” She held her hands up. “The ritual itself is simple, of course, but from what I have learned, you are far from ready to face the Shadows.”

“Not ready?” I frowned, wondering who had been speaking to her on my behalf. “I admit, I haven’t quite mastered all of my powers in my human body, but I’m sure I could figure it out should it come down to it.”

“It has nothing to do with your powers, but with you.” She once again looked off to the side at something I couldn’t see. I could hear some distant noise that could have been a groan or something else I equally didn’t want to know about.

Ignoring the sound, I tried to get some answers. “What does it have to do with me?”

“How is your fiancé doing?” She turned her attention back to me, a small, mischievous smile on her face. The question came so far out of left field that I almost thought I’d misheard her.

What did Dorian have to do with any of this?

I frowned. “How should I know?”

“That’s not what I heard.” Her eyes locked with mine as if she knew more than she was saying and in her case, it was probably true. “I heard you stomped all over the poor Prince’s heart after he caught you with our darling Jewels.”

I gaped at her and then ground my teeth. Bastian the bastard had been spinning tales again. Next time I saw him, I was going to do more than kick him in the balls—I’d make a necklace out of them.

“Not that I blame you,” she continued as if my expression didn’t matter. “He is quite a delectable piece of meat, if a little full of himself.”

“More like tried to mind rape me,” I growled out, not believing my mother could ever find anyone but my father attractive.

“Nonsense.” She waved her hand at me, dismissing my accusation. “He was only trying to fulfill his orders. You can hardly blame him for being a little over enthusiastic.”

“Over enthusiastic?” I scoffed. “He tried to own me! If I wasn’t as powerful as everyone says I am, I’d be his little sex slave right now, and that doesn’t bother you?”

“I had no doubt you would have overcome any who would seek to control you, which is another topic I wanted to discuss.” Her gaze turned serious as if she hadn’t just tried to justify rape. “There may have been a few rumors about you that have gotten out into the populace. While I have heavy guards on the doors out of our world, you will want to be on the lookout.”

“You are a little late on that. I had a nasty visit from a few faeries and a troll already.” I crossed my arms, still irritated at the hole in my bedroom that was barely held together by a piece of plywood. “And what kind of rumors?”

All kinds of things began to run through my head. Anything could be going around. From my involvement with the Shadows to my crazy powers. Either way, it was best to know what I was to be prepared for.

“A troll? Really? How did you ever get away from it in that pathetic human body?” She laughed, not making me feel any better.

“What kind of rumors, Mother?” I ground out, choosing to be the bigger person and ignore her blatant insults.

“Very well, if you must know.” She sniffed. “Someone, I do not know who, let on that your blood has some kind of magical properties, and that they could gain your powers by draining you.”

“What?” My voice rose to a high-pitched squeak. “That’s ridiculous, you cannot transfer powers between Fae, not even through blood.”

My mother shrugged. “I did not say it was a logical rumor, only that some of the people have begun to believe it, and they could very well attack you.”

It made sense now why the faeries had attacked. They had tasted my blood before, and no doubt it was easy to sway them into believing the rumor was true. If they believed it to be true, it would be too easy to

convince some of the other Faes to believe it, as well. As if my life was not complicated enough as it was.

“Fine. Consider me warned. Now, what do I have to do to be ready?” I tried to steer the conversation back to the larger threat.

“You will know when you are.” She turned, as if to end the conversation, but stopped mid-turn. “Oh yes, one more thing. I found something of yours.”

“What?” I asked. I didn’t remember losing anything.

“He was found snooping around, and since he had been avoiding me for a while now, we had a lot of catching up to do.” I suddenly knew who she had been looking at through our conversation.

“What did you do?” I snarled, my anger flaring to life.

The power in me crackled along my skin. The grunting from before had to have come from Chess. With all the horrible things she had already forced on him, I couldn’t imagine the horrors of what he had been subjected to now.

“Do not get upset.” She tutted at me as if chastising a child. “He was mine before he was ever yours, and I was simply trying to get what was owed to me.” She frowned off to the side, irritation filling her face. “But I see that I will not be getting my full payment anytime soon, so you may have him back.”

She waved her hand to a guard, and the sound of something being dragged drew my attention to the side of the mirror. My eyes landed on an unconscious Chess, beaten and bloodied.

The guards left him lying in a crumbled pile in front of the mirror. He had to be touching the mirror for it to work, but he wasn’t awake to do anything of the sort. I stared at my mother. She sat on her throne watching in amusement at my distress.

Narrowing my eyes in determination, I knew what I had to do. Having only activated a mirror once before and only in the Underground, I wasn’t entirely sure it would work, but I reached my hand out, anyway. I touched my hand to the frame of the mirror and poured my powers into it. At first, nothing happened. Then the solid glass began to ripple. I placed my hand on cool liquid, the feel of it swirling around my skin still foreign to me. Bending down, I stuck both arms through the surface and grabbed a hold of Chess.

He was heavier than he looked. I grunted at the effort it took to move him even an inch, while my mother watched me with amusement. Growling, I placed one foot on each side of the mirror and yanked Chess through the mirror's surface.

When he was back on my side and safe in my arms, I glared back at the mirror. It had become solid again, and the smirking face of my mother was fading from view.

This wasn't over. Not by a long shot.



Chapter 19

Broken But Still Fabulous

I HELD CHESS against me to take in the damage to his body. Bruises marred his beautiful face, making his eyes puffy and swollen; his usual grinning lips were split. The pale pink of his locks was colored dark brown where blood had dried in his hair and his garments were in shambles. I could see where a blade had torn into him through the rips in his clothes. I needed to take care of him, fast.

“Alice!” I yelled. “Help!”

As I was checking to see if he was still bleeding, Alice rushed in.

“My goodness!” She gasped.

“Don’t you faint on me,” I warned as I tried to lift him up, but found myself lacking super strength. What was the point of improved senses if I didn’t get the whole shebang?

“I would never.” She scoffed and knelt beside me.

Being careful not to bump him, I twisted around to see how far the bed was away from us. It wasn’t that far, maybe a couple of feet; two small girls like us could handle it. Probably.

“Just help me get him onto the bed.” My voice strained as I tried to lift him into my arms.

Alice tried to pick him up around his waist.

“No, don’t,” I snapped. “Grab his legs. There’re fewer injuries there. We don’t want to damage him any more than he already is.”

It took us three tries before we finally dragged him onto the bed. It wasn’t the most graceful or efficient way to do it, but we got it done. Squatting down to unlace his boots that were miraculously still intact, I motioned to Alice.

“Go into the bathroom and get me some clean towels,” I grunted as I tried to get the boot off of his muscular calf. “Then get under the sink and grab the box that has a cross on it that says first aid.”

“Understood.” Alice made for the door while I wrestled with his other boot.

Once both feet were free and, thankfully uninjured, I returned to his chest, where his skin peeked through the cuts in his clothes. Just seeing him like this made my blood boil.

The cuts were the same as before. The old scars on his body I had tried to ask him about time and time again, had they also been from my mother? It only made sense that they would have come from her as well.

“Grab some water from the kitchen!” I called.

Alice hollered back an *okay* from the bathroom.

“Now, let’s get these pants off of you,” I mumbled to myself, while my face heated up at the thought of seeing him nude for the first time.

I had imagined seeing him naked plenty of times. Most of them in my dreams. But in every scenario, I had never imagined the first time I got his pants off would be like this.

“Here you are.” Alice brought in the items I had requested and sat them on the edge of the bed. She arched her brow as I stood with my hands at the waist of his pants, but not moving. “What are you doing?”

“Should I wake him?” I let go of his pants and stepped back. “I should wake him, shouldn’t I? I mean, I wouldn’t want to be disrobed without my knowledge.”

“But wouldn’t it be easier to clean his wounds while he is unconscious?” Alice reasoned. “Besides, I don’t think he would care, either way. I think this is more of you having an issue with seeing him disrobed. But you know, if you’d rather not, I could always—”

“No!” I cut in, before adding, “I mean no, and it’s all right. It’s just me being silly. I got this. You can go back to your reality shows. I’ll call if I need anything.”

I waved her off, suddenly more than ready to get on with it.

She gave me a knowing grin before shuffling out the door.

“It’s okay.” I shook the nerves out of my hands, trying to pep myself up for what I had to do. “You can do this. Just think of it like you are taking care of a relative. Not a hunky Fae, who may or may not be your boyfriend.”

The last bit didn’t make me feel any better.

With a deep breath, I quickly unbuttoned his pants and pulled down the zipper. My eyes grew large, and my gaze darted up to the ceiling when I realized Chess liked to go all-natural underneath his pants. It really shouldn’t have surprised me.

With my eyes on the ceiling, I got the pants off his butt, but maneuvering them down his legs became a problem. Throwing a towel over his fun bits, I tried my best to not be too interested in them as I surveyed his wounds.

The pants stuck to him from where the blood had dried on his legs. Grabbing the scissors from the first aid kit, I cut around the wounds and peeled the pants away.

He groaned and began to mutter words that I couldn't make out. I leaned in, hoping to catch some of what he was saying.

"Hearts," he mumbled, and I waited for him to continue. He remained silent.

"What about the hearts?" I urged.

"Not ready. Won't give her the hearts," he answered, his lips flopping over themselves from the puffiness.

"What hearts?"

He didn't speak further.

"Well, that was entirely unhelpful." I waited to see if he would wake up and stifled a giggle when he snorted.

He didn't seem to be waking up, though.

God that would have been embarrassing. I could imagine the look on his face, not to mention what he'd have to say if he saw me at his waist trying to rip his pants off. I couldn't keep the heat from filling my face as I got the rest of his clothes off.

When he was completely nude, sans the towel over his bits, I tried to take in the damage. Most of the bleeding had stopped, and there weren't any internal organs spilling out of him, thank God. Blood I could deal with, but organs not so much. Luckily, none of the cuts were very deep. They seemed more for torture rather than to actually cause him mortal injury.

"What did she want from you?" I asked myself as I set to work on cleaning him up.

It didn't take long for the water Alice brought me to turn pink, but I was able to clean most of him up before it needed to be changed. Since nothing needed stitches from what I could tell—not that I knew how to do that, or could really take him to a doctor for that matter—I simply covered them with bandages. Unfortunately, my bandaging skills were lacking, leaving most of his torso looking like a mummy.

By the time I had him cleaned up and bandaged, it was well past my bedtime. Too exhausted to care about being in bed with the lecherous feline, I crawled onto the other side of the mattress and collapsed onto my pillow. I turned on my side to watch him as my eyes began to droop, and then I was gone.



I WOKE TO THE SOUND of a male voice groaning and the bed shifting next to me. I bolted upright when I realized what was happening. Chess had sat up on the bed and was in the process of trying to get up.

I put my hands on his arm. “Lay back down. You shouldn’t be moving around so much.”

He hesitated, and then complied with my wishes, though it was probably more because of the pain than anything.

“What happened?” He watched me beneath his pale eyelashes with a pained look on his face.

“You tell me?” I lay back down next to him, my gaze focused on his face and not the way the sheet had dipped at his waist.

His eyes went up to the ceiling, and he was quiet for a long time. So long that I thought he wasn’t going to answer.

“I went to tell your mother to leave you alone,” he said, at last, his voice was soft.

I thought I saw a faint blush on his face.

“But I thought you went to make preparations in case other Fae got out?” It was admirable that he would put himself in danger for my sake, and he obviously didn’t do that sort of thing often.

“I did—make preparations that is. When I was finished, I confronted the queen.” He said the word queen like it was a vile word, which I was beginning to think it was as well. No queen would do what my mother had done and have a clear conscious. I know I couldn’t have.

“Why would you do that? It’s not like she could really do anything to me. I mean, she needs me, right?” I frowned.

“And that is why, my pet, she must leave you alone.” He looked me dead in the eyes, seriousness in his tone. “Let her find another way to get rid of the Shadows.”

His eyes gave away more than he was saying. Something was wrong. What did he know about defeating the Shadows that my mother hadn't already told me?

"Why? It's just a little blood and some words. She told me herself." Even if she had been lying, it wasn't like I could tell through a mirror. But I doubt she would have lied right to my face in front of those in the room with her. Even if it was only the guards.

"Yes, I suppose that is all it is." Chess barked out a laugh, and then grabbed his side and moaned.

"Then what?" I sat up from the bed. "What's the big deal?"

"The big deal?" His eyes filled with anger. Whether it was anger at me or anger at my mother, I didn't know. "The big deal, little girl, is your mother, Queen of the Fucking Underground, is offering up her own daughter for slaughter." He gave a dark laugh again. "And just after the kingdom thinks we got you back."

I didn't understand. I heard the words he was saying, but they didn't make any sense. How could I be going to my death? Nothing anyone had said had portrayed me dying, and a little blood certainly didn't bring thoughts of death to mind.

"Hey." He turned his emerald eyes to me, the anger in them gone. He reached out with one clawed hand and cupped my face. "Do not worry, love. You won't die if I have anything to say about it."

"Because I'm not ready, right?" I tried not to let my uncertainty at his words show.

Something passed behind his eyes, but he simply smiled. "Right, so..." He trailed off, looking down at the sheet covering him. "You couldn't wait until I was conscious to tear my clothes off?"

"You wish. Alice did it," I lied, letting him change the topic, because it was getting depressing, even for me.

His eyes lit up in surprise, but he leaned in close to me until his nose was a hair from my neck. "I don't think she did, did she?"

My breathing became shallow. I swallowed and stuttered out, "Yes, she did. I faint at the sight of blood."

Chess loomed above me, the sheet all but gone. My body stiffened. I kept my eyes on him as he lowered himself to his elbows, allowing his lower half to press against me. If I hadn't already been breathless, that would have done it for me.

“You forget, my kitty Kat.” He took a big inhale of my scent and growled. “I can smell you, and you smell like a lie.”

Instead of answering, I focused on the bandages that were now colored red. “You’re bleeding, you know.”

“Damn.” He rolled off me with a wince. “You sure know how to kill the mood, love.”

I gave a nervous chuckle. “That’s me, mood killer and virgin sacrifice.”

“Virgin?” Chess quirked his brow.

“Okay, not virgin, but you know what I mean.” My face had to have been as red as a tomato right then. I got off the bed to get more bandages as a diversion.

“You stayed with me?” He questioned as I dug through the box of supplies. “Why?”

“Because I care about you. Why else?”

“No one has ever cared about me. Not enough to stay by my side through the night.” He said it so softly I almost didn’t hear him.

“Someone must have cared for you.” I turned from the box, an aching beginning in my heart. “Your mother? Father?”

“No. No one.” He shook his head, his dirty hair hanging around his face, hiding the darkness that had overcome his features. “I didn’t get to know my mother. She bore me as was her duty and then gave me to my father who tolerated a half Seelie child who was like him but not in so many ways. He was strict, and yet had a way of knowing exactly what everyone needed, but never me.”

“I’m sure he cared.” I approached the bed, my words more meaning to comfort myself than him. “He must have, maybe he just didn’t know how to show it.”

“Perhaps.” His voice was small, as if he couldn’t begin to believe it.

“What happened to him?”

“Oh, well, after the queen found out I couldn’t give her what she wanted, she paid my father for the right to have me be the moderator. I haven’t seen him since.” He kept his eyes down while I went about changing his bandages. The cuts were starting to heal already, thank God for Fae abilities.

“That’s terrible. How old were you?” I tried to keep the conversation going, no matter how upsetting, to either distract him, or me I wasn’t sure

which.

“Thirteen.”

“So young?” I had a horrible, disgusting thought. “Wait. They didn’t pay you the same way they do now, did they?”

“Oh, no.” Chess laughed at the horror on my face. “I didn’t start getting paid until I was of age and could become of some use to her. I was given a home and food, but I had to find my own friends and make my own fun.”

“That must have been very lonely.” I felt my heart break a little for him. I might be a loner by nature, but not to have anyone there, not even a parent, was unimaginable.

“Well, it was a long time ago, and I have plenty of friends now, and I have...” He trailed off, looking down at me with uncertainty.

“Me,” I filled in for him. “You have me.”

“Yes. I do, don’t I?” He gave me a smile that made my heart feel like it would burst from my chest.

So instead of dealing with the sudden influx of emotion, I did what anyone would have done: fled.

“I’m going to go check on Alice.” I stood abruptly, ignoring the startled look on his face as I closed the door behind me.

As I made my way to the living room, I tried to still the thundering in my chest. I remembered this emotion. It was something I’d promised myself I’d never feel again after what happened with Dorian. I couldn’t feel this way. Not already.

It was barely dawn, and Alice was already on the couch, watching some early morning talk show.

“How is he?” She glanced up from the TV briefly.

“He’s awake and getting better, but he said something I wanted to confirm with you,” I explained to her how Chess was born and what he had to deal with on his own. When I finished, I had to ask, “Did you know about this?”

“About Chess? Yes, unfortunately, I did. I told you I have talked to him before. He had come to my mirror a few times, each time wanting to know why I did this to him.” She shrugged, as if there was nothing new about it and to her it probably wasn’t.

“You? How was it your fault?”

“Why does anyone think it is my fault?” She scoffed, turning back to her show and the never-ending bag of chips she kept finding.

Where was she getting them? I swore I never kept junk food in the house, besides my ice cream fix, because I had no self-control when it came to food. I’d be as big as a house if I didn’t keep them out of the cupboards.

I did know why anyone would think it was her fault, though. She seemed to be the go-to person for the blame whenever something went wrong. Just because of one stupid wish.

“Sometimes, I wish I had never made that silly wish and had just stayed here. Then none of this would have happened. You would be happy with your prince, and the Shadows would not even be a problem.” Her blue eyes glanced longingly around the room as if the cheap wallpaper with dancing flowers was a palace.

“The Shadows would still have been a problem that needed to be dealt with,” I assured, sitting next to her on the couch.

As I sat beside her recalling my conversation with Chess, I realized something. This started before I became human. Before the tree and my wish. Even before Dorian and I got engaged.

Could my mother really be that evil? She surely wasn’t capable of such depravity. But all the answers, the half-breeds, the need for a half-breed to defeat the shadows, all of it seemed to focus entirely on me. It had always been me.

Jumping up from the couch, I eyed the curious Alice. “Keep an eye on him, will you?”

“Where are you going?” She didn’t move from her spot on the couch. I think I’d created a monster. Shaking my head, I started for the kitchen door.

“What do I tell Chess if he asks?” She finally looked up from her show.

“Just tell him I’ll be back and not to worry.” I glanced toward the bedroom, anxiety filling me. I didn’t want to leave him in his vulnerable state, but I needed to know.

“But where are you going?” Alice stood up now, confusion crinkling her face.

“It’s time for me to go home.”



Chapter 20

Queen Of The Underground

THIS TIME, WHEN I entered the cave at the pond behind the house and saw the glowing swirling glyphs, I didn't stop to ooh and ahh at them. Instead, I marched to the back of the cave where the opening was. When I stood in front of the hole, I didn't think about the bugs that could be living in there, or the time in that movie someone's arm got bit off. I simply shoved my hand in the hole and prepared myself for the straw slurping feeling.

Too soon, I was thrown out of the portal, through the open door, and straight on the floor. I held my hands out to brace for the impact. It didn't hurt as much this time around since I knew what was coming, but it still smarted like no other. I pulled myself up and was stunned by the sight before me.

The reception desk was in shambles. The monitor where Type, one of the two heads of the bird sisters, liked to watch Game of Thrones was smashed to pieces. The glass still littered the pure white floor. The wood of the desk was splintered, and pieces of it were scattered all around the white void. The desk was nothing compared to the doors.

The doors that led to the Seelie and UnSeelie Realms had been blown off their hinges. Even the door I had come through was no longer in its place. It too lay shattered on the ground. In place of the doors, to my relief, were guards of the Seelie Court. Each door had their own set of guards except the one I had come through, and the only door that was still intact: the door to the Shadow Realm.

I could only think that the door was the hole my mother had talked about opening. Why would she put it here? Where anyone could get to it? Maybe she was just lazy and made it easier on herself to find. Like before, there was no handle to the worn and burn marked door, and if anything, it looked even more beat up. It was as if someone from the inside was trying to get out.

There were two guards covered in gold plated armor in front of the two doors to the Fae courts. As if two apiece would stop any intruders that were

determined to leave. Or enter, in my case.

The guards watched me with cautious eyes, not moving from their posts. Last time I had gone through the UnSeelie door, since that was where Trip and Mop were from, but this time, I headed for the door to the Seelie Court. I could only hope it would be faster than finding my way to Chess' house again.

Stopping in front of the guards, I took them in. They were both equally attractive, as most of the Seelie Court Fae were. Knowing my mother though, they were guards because they weren't beautiful by Fae standards, but in the human realm, they would have still gotten hit on by any woman in their right mind. One had dark hair that hung to his shoulders and bronze colored skin, while the other had almost pitch-black skin and in a striking contrast, white hair.

"Let me pass," I addressed them both, digging down to bring out my inner princess to push a commanding tone out that they would obey.

The guards looked between themselves, their faces equally conflicted. One of them even leaned out from his post to glance at the two guards in front of the other door. Those two shook their head at them in response.

"You shouldn't be here right now, your highness. It isn't safe." The guard with bronze coloring tried to appease me with reason.

"I wish to see my mother, the queen, and I demand you move aside." I kept my voice even but firm, allowing it alone to pave my way.

The two looked at each other again, a hint of fear in their eyes. Were they afraid of me? Or my mother?

"But we have strict orders that none may pass through these doors, or it's our heads. Not after the faeries and that half-breed got through," the guard with the hair that almost blended into the room around us bit out a gruff reply.

"Don't forget the troll," One of the guards from the other door finally spoke up. Apparently, my mother was the scarier of the two. I would have to fix that and soon.

My guard nodded. "Right, and the troll."

"Don't worry, I will take full responsibility, but it is urgent I see my mother." Since diplomacy wasn't working, I tried for being their friend.

"I'm sorry, really I am, but I have kids. I can't get stuck in a mirror cell." The bronze god shook his head in apology and turned his eyes away as if to dismiss me.

I crossed my arms over my chest, irritation flittering through me. How was I going to get in to see her if they wouldn't let me in? I could go back and just use the mirror in my room, but then I'd have to deal with explaining what I was doing to Chess, and I wasn't ready to see him again yet. I could try to rush them, but they were at least 200 pounds each, and I was pushing 140, barely. Or I could use my new powers to throw them out of the way.

I was getting ready to do just that when a voice called out, "Let her pass."

The guards parted to reveal Seer as she stepped into the doorway of the Seelie Court in all her blue glory. Her pixie cut, periwinkle blue hair was swept up into a fauxhawk, giving her more of a 'don't fuck with me' attitude that was only insinuated more by her floor length electric blue body suit. I bet it was a bitch to get that skintight suit on over her wings, but with six arms, she had the advantage. Those said arms were crossed over her chest as her obsidian eyes narrowed in on the guards, daring them to challenge her.

"Seer." The guards bowed their heads as they moved out of her way.

Seer ignored them and came over to me, her arms, all six of them, stretched out to envelop me in a warm, yet awkward, hug. I stood as stiff as a board and let her get her greeting out before gently untangling myself from her arms. Like Chess, she could get a little out of hand if I didn't put down boundaries. Not like that had ever stopped the cat.

"While I'm happy to see you, what are you doing in the Seelie Court?" In the past, it hadn't been an everyday occurrence where a Fae left their respective court. From what Mop had told me, it was even more unlikely now.

"You are not the only one worried in this troubled time." Giving me a small smile, she wrapped a couple of arms around me and pulled me to her side. She turned to the guards who resumed their posts in front of the door. "The human is not only your princess, but our savior. Would you dare deny her passage?" She eyed the two guards, who stood speechless. Seer turned to all of the guards. "Remember, she will be the one who destroys the Shadows and save us. She'll save us all."

Her words were too close to those of the mysterious tree. I shot her a curious look, and she smiled that knowing smile I was beginning to hate. As

much as I wanted to question her, it wasn't the time. Questions later. I had more pressing matters to attend to.

Seer escorted me through the doorway and past the unhappy guards. Unlike when I had entered the Underground the first time, I stepped out onto a marble floor, instead of face down on the ground.

Walking down the gold-colored hallways, arm and arm with Seer, I bit my lip and asked, "Did you know about Chess?"

"I don't have to have the sight to know the cat's plight. Everyone knew." Seer frowned.

"How could you know what he was going through and do nothing?" I stopped in my tracks, pulling her around to look at me.

Seer turned to me with a weary smile. "It is not like we didn't try. Unlike those Seelie snots and, with the exception of your betrothed, we UnSeelie do not turn our backs on our kind, half-blood or not."

I opened my mouth to ask about my mother's intentions for me, but she beat me to it.

"Do not worry. Everything will come to pass the way it should, and something's are better to be forgiven and forgotten, rather than dwelling on them. Your mother did what she thought was best at the time, even if it meant losing you."

I frowned at her words. If she knew what I was there for, what I needed confirmation of, then I had no doubt in my mind that my mother had done exactly what I thought she had. I had always believed she had my happiness in mind, even when she was taking heads left and right in the name of justice. I thought one of those moments was when she introduced me to my betrothed, but even that act was tainted.

The anger I had felt when Chess told me about his childhood mixed with the confirmation from Seer made my magic whip around inside me like a hurricane. It forced me to storm past Seer and on to where I knew the throne room lie. Large double doors covered in intricate vines of gold and bronze lie between my mother and me. Without giving myself time to chicken out, I wrenched the doors open, the sound of them slamming against the wall echoed through the room.

Inside the throne room, which hadn't changed from its golden and white decoration, sat my mother and her court. The white columns of the room held up the golden ceiling and the nobles, while more clothed than last time, still matched the décor.

My father, to my unfortunate luck, was present. I didn't want his presence to lessen my anger. It was the only thing keeping me from shrinking back from the curious and somewhat contrite glances I was getting from the court.

"Daughter, what an unexpected surprise." My mother, ever the politician, sat on her throne. "What are you doing here?"

Not caring about the nobles lining the room, I marched up to stand before the throne. My eyes met my father's, who gave me a small smile in welcome. Though his face was young, his eyes showed his age and weariness of it all. By this time, he should have retired, and I should have ruled with my husband, but since I was the only heir and I had died, there was no one to take their place. It wasn't like my mother wanted to give up her power, anyway.

"I'm sure you know exactly what I'm here about." My rage crackled in my voice.

"The half-breed," my mother responded without hesitation, a small smirk spreading across her face.

"How could you do that to him? To any of them?" I chanced a glance at my father, and I could see the shame and regret cover his face. At least one of them showed remorse.

"I am doing what I think is best for our kingdom. If a few half-breeds get hurt along the way, who is going to care?"

The crowd of nobles chuckled, and she smiled at them.

"I do." My voice was clear as I laid down the line of where I stood in this fight.

"One among thousands." She giggled, the sound of it like nails on a chalkboard. She stood from her throne, her golden gown melting around her as she moved. "You would be their champion? You cannot belong to both worlds. Either you are part of ours, or theirs."

I held my ground as she moved to me. When I was Fae, I would have been able to meet her eyes with no problem, but in my human form I barely came up to her breasts. Which was probably why she was trying to use her height to intimidate me into submitting. My mother always was one to use what weapons were at hand.

"Then I would choose theirs every time." I stared straight up into her eyes, never flinching.

She watched my face as if she hadn't heard me correctly. Searching for something that I had been telling everyone wasn't there anymore. I wasn't the little princess who did what mommy told her. For once in my hundred and fifty years, I was standing on my own two feet, and no one was going to make me back down.

"What happened to you, Daughter? Does your human blood addle your mind?"

The nobles gave a nervous chuckle.

"Our world is about power, and when you ascend to the throne, you will be a great and mighty queen. Then, if you want to save all the half-breeds, you are free to do so, but until then, you will follow my rules and do as I say, or you might find yourself one or two kittens short of a litter."

"Answer me this one question, Mother," I implored, ignoring the fact that she had basically threatened Chess' life.

"Ask your question," she snapped, moving back toward her throne.

"Did you arrange my marriage so I would produce a half-breed heir for the sole purpose to use against the Shadows?" I let the question hang in the air as the room quieted. Every eye was on the Seelie Queen.

My mother gave an elegant shrug. "Of course I did. What do you think all these mutts are running around for?"

"Then yes, I have chosen a side."

"Good." My mother moved to sit back down on her throne, seemingly done with our conversation. "Then we will prepare for your move back to the palace."

She motioned to a servant that sped away to do just that.

"I meant, yes, I choose them. The half-breeds." I let it set in for a moment, before continuing, "I don't know what happened to you, Mother. When did you become so heartless? Or maybe you have always been that way and I have just now realized it. You say that we cannot afford to lose any more of our kind, and yet, you damn us with the choices you've made. And then here you are saying that those who are not pure are not worthy to be saved? You are no worse than the Fae you condemned to darkness," I snarled at her, my magic buzzing along my skin in agreement.

"How dare you speak to me that way! I am your queen." She stomped her foot like a child and snapped her fingers. "Guards! Seize her. Daughter or not, you will do as you are told."

At her words, my senses became alert to the guards in the room. There was perhaps a half dozen. Not as many as there normally would have been, but I assumed most of them were off chasing the escaped Fae.

I waited to see what they would do, if they would really follow the orders of a mad queen. When they were close enough to surround me, I could see the uncertainty and unwillingness on their faces. They didn't agree with what their queen was doing. Whether it was putting me in a cell, or what was happening with the half-breeds, or a mixture of everything, my mother was losing her people, and now it was up to me.

"What are you waiting for?" My mother's voice called out sharp as ice along my skin, and the guards descended onto me like a stack of cards.

My magic was ready for them. It had been waiting for this very moment and was tired of being in control. It wanted to play. I released the built up energy. Just like cards, the guards blew away.

Unlike when I had fought the faeries, these guards didn't go down so easily. The moment they fell to the ground, they were back on their feet and coming for me.

I was not a fighter. I didn't know martial arts. I knew basic self-defense, enough to get away from one single attacker, but more than that? I was screwed.

My eyes darted around the room, trying to think of something to disable them. My eyes landed on a small tree near the double doors, and I remembered what happened at my mom's house. I made the plants grow from just my magic. It had been incredible. I had felt powerful and invincible, and while the thought of a power drain was not anything I wanted to happen again, I didn't have any other choice.

Not close enough to the plant to push my magic into it directly, I bent down on the marble floor and pressed my hands to the surface. My actions caused the guards to pause. Looking down at my hands, I could see why they would hesitate.

Green swirling energy spilled from my hands and made its way across the floor, searching and poking, looking for some kind of opening to pour themselves into.

"What are you fools doing?" My mother screamed from her throne. "Stop her!"

Shaking their heads, they drew their swords.

They inched toward me, their steps unsure and wary of the magic at their feet. Ignoring them, I pushed my magic to go to the planter, feeding into it, making it mine.

It didn't take long for the plant to respond. The small tree like foliage broke the glass around it, its roots spreading out across the floor. The green leaves grew to the size of footballs, and its limbs filled out swinging around it, trying to hit anyone who came near.

The nobles cried out and scattered. The guards turned their backs on me, their focus now on the growing monstrosity I had created.

Blood pumping in my ears, I forced more magic into it. My adrenaline spiked and an overwhelming need clouded my mind. It wasn't big enough, powerful enough. I needed more.

The small tree turned ginormous, sprouting vines that whipped out at the guards. They swung their swords trying to hack at it, but it was too strong. I was too strong.

As the vines wrapped around the guards, immobilizing them a feeling of triumph filled me. I didn't have long to celebrate before my head was yanked back, breaking my connection with my creation. My eyes searched out my mother's face and winced at the bite of her nails in my hair.

"Enough." She snarled in my ear, pulling on my hair.

"It will never be enough." I twisted in her grasp until I was facing her, my head at an odd angle. Smirking at the shock on her face, I placed my hands on her and forced my magic into her. I expected her to let go right away, but her magic fought against mine.

Like a razor, it sliced at my magic, but for each hole she made, more filled its place. Still, she held onto my hair like a lifeline.

Growling my impatience, I jerked my head in her hand before slamming my forehead into her nose. The brunt force sent a ringing in my ears that was overpowered by the relief of her hand dropping from my hair.

She clutched her face as blood dripped from her nose, staring at me. The fearless queen was no longer in control and she knew it.

I held my hand up and pushed my energy at her, shoving her back until she fell to the steps of her dais. Turning away from her sprawled form, I took in the surrounding room. The nobles inched back when my gaze landed on them and the guards lay unconscious on the ground leaving a path out of the throne room in their wake.

My eyes landed on the creature I had created. It sat there, still large but not attacking. Waiting.

Part of me celebrated in what I had created, while the other part was horrified. Did I keep it or put it back the way it was? I looked over the creature and saw the veins of my magic coming from it and had an idea.

Calling to the magic, I watched in awe as it slid out of the monster and slowly crept back under my skin. With each sliver of magic, I felt more powerful and more alive than before. The drain I had felt the first time I had used so much magic was nonexistent.

Not looking back on my still shouting mother, I took a step over one of the guards and toward the doors. I watched the nobles around me, waiting to see if they would be the next to attack. It was when I got to the door that I realized none of them would. While I might be a human, and a reluctant princess, in their eyes, I was now their queen.

Now if only I could earn it.



Chapter 21

CHESHIRE S. CAT

THE GUARDS IN the Between let me back out without hesitation, but with a hint of fear in their eyes. Word traveled fast in the Underground. Not that I was complaining.

Within moments, I was back in my kitchen.

“What happened?” Alice turned from the sink.

“It went as I expected.” As I filled her in on the events that had occurred, and the realization that my mother had masterminded the whole situation for the specific reason of sacrificing my child, her own grandchild, to defeat the Shadows, a sense of weariness spread through me.

It had been a long night. Hell, a long century. And all I wanted was to take a long hot shower and go to sleep in my warm bed. The bed that currently housed an injured feline.

“How is Chess doing?” I tilted my head toward the empty plate in her hand.

Alice pressed her lips together; displeasure and frustration clear on her face.

“I tried to be a kind hostess in your stead by bringing him something to eat, but what do I get for my troubles? Yelled at!” She placed the dish in the sink with more force than I would have liked. I only had so many dishes left after my own fit of destruction.

“Where is he now?” I sighed, running my hand through my hair.

“Still in bed. Says he was going to wait right there for you to return and wouldn’t move an inch any sooner.” She crossed her arms over her chest, looking the epitome of the snotty little girl she used to be.

“I better go check on him.” I pointed my thumb toward the bedroom, backing out to end the conversation.

Down the hall, I opened the door to my bedroom and walked in, coming face-to-face with a much healed, and very nude Chess, standing in front of the bed.

I promptly flipped around.

“What are you doing up?” My voice squeaked as I stared hard at the bedroom door.

“Trying to salvage what little there is left of my pants.” His voice was nonchalant, as if he wasn’t standing there completely nude. “If you were so impatient to get me undressed you could have woken me, at least to save the pants.”

My eyes fell on the pile of laundry I had yet to do sitting by the door. I grabbed the set of clothes I had intended to wear the previous night.

Without turning around, I called over my shoulder, “I’m going to shower.”

I darted out the door and closed it on his answer, my mind already set on showering, and not on the image of his naked body burned into my retinas.

With the hot water pouring down me, I leaned my forehead against the wall. So much had happened over the last few weeks, it was hard to keep up. I’d moved back home, gotten a job I didn’t really want, and then got sucked into another world, only to be spit back out as their princess.

Now, not only did my kingdom want me back, but also they wanted me to defeat an evil force that I already had a sort of kind of deal with. Not to forget that defeating the Shadows could very well kill me. Even with all of my memories as the Fae Princess, it was still hard to believe it was all real.

I turned around and came face to face with a smirking Chess. Jumping in place with a squeal, my feet gave out from under me. I grabbed my grandmother’s support bar on the wall and half caught myself from smashing face first into Chess’ rather impressive parts.

Clutching the bar like a lifeline, I tried to angle my body away so I wasn’t showing off all my goods to his searching eyes. “What the fuck do you think you are doing?”

Chuckling at my disgraceful scrambling on the shower floor, Chess reached up and turned the shower spray on him. “Like I tried to tell you before you ran away, while you did an excellent job patching me up, I still feel quite dirty.”

“You could have waited until I was finished!” I climbed to my feet, keeping my back to his wet luscious body.

“In my fragile state? What if I had needed your help? I could have fallen and died in the shower. You wouldn’t want that to happen, would

you?” I could just hear the smiling in his voice. He was enjoying this far too much.

He reached around me to grab the loofa off the rack in front of me, and I gripped my arms over my chest, yipping like a little dog.

“Stay on your side!” I said, and then added, “And close your eyes.”

“Very well.” He sighed his reluctant agreement, but his tail whipped out and stroked along my inner thigh.

“And keep your tail to yourself!” I clamped my legs closed, pushing his appendage away.

“Will you clean my back?” He held the loofa out in front of my face.

“Do it yourself,” I said between clenched teeth.

“But I can’t reach it on my own, even with a tail.” I could just imagine the pout on his face.

Giving in, I jerked the loofa from his grasp. “Fine, turn around, though, and no hanky-panky.”

“Of course.”

I peeked over my shoulder to be sure that he had indeed twisted around before lowering my arms from my chest and turning to him. With his eyes not on me, I could now look my share. I placed the loofa on his lean and muscular back, sliding it up and down to spread the soap along his skin. The water dripped down his back, displaying every ripple and curvature. My eyes followed the suds down the line of his spine to where his delicious butt stood high and taut where his tail hung toward the ground.

Though he was nude before me, my eyes were drawn to where the tail protruded out of his body. It wasn’t like it was just attached like a piece of a costume, but like it was an extension of his spine. His tail always seemed to have a mind of its own, not always portraying the mood on his face. I must have been staring too long, because his voice startled me.

“You can touch it, if you want.” His words were thick and deep as if my hand on his back had been enough to bring up his desire.

“Uh. All done.” I gave a nervous chuckle and dropped the loofa before bolting from the shower.

I grabbed the thick robe on the back of the bathroom door and yanked open the door, not bothering to put it on before leaving.

With the robe firmly wrapped around me, I opened the bedroom door to find a wet and tempting Chess waiting for me.

“How do you keep doing that?” I turned my back on him, not ready to face the nude Fae full on.

“Half-breed, remember? The rules don’t apply to us.” His voice was filled with humor at my discomfort.

“But I can’t go through walls.” I attempted to keep the topic off of the elephant in the room. The very wet, very masculine, and yummy elephant that I wanted to climb onto and ride.

“You could if you wanted to.” His voice was by my ear, and when his hands touched my shoulders, I couldn’t help but tense up.

His hands dropped to his side.

“I don’t understand you,” he muttered, more to himself, as he moved a few feet away from me. “You said you wanted me, and even that you cared for me, but whenever I try to touch you, you shy away,” he paused, “Am I that repugnant?”

“Of course not!” I spun around, disregarding the fact that he was nude, and grabbed his hand. Bringing my hand up to his face, I cupped his cheek in my palm. “You are the most beautiful being I have ever seen, human or Fae.”

Daring to close the distance between us further, I let my eyes fill with everything he made me feel, the desire, the laughter, even the emotions that I had not dared to name even to myself.

“I think about you all the time. When you aren’t here, I wonder what you are doing, and when you are, my eyes can’t stop themselves from searching you out. I could never ever find you anything but spectacular.”

Raw emotions filled his face, and before I could decipher what they were, his lips sought mine out. Our mouths clashed together, and I let him draw my tongue into his mouth, the distinct taste of him filling my senses. I couldn’t think of any better pastime than to be right here, kissing him. When his hands found their way to the tie of my robe, I arched into him.

With my permission given, the robe was pulled open, and he hunted out the skin beneath. The moment his fingers touched my hips, I was on fire. His claws slid along my skin, stroking in time with our mouths, and just when I felt like I couldn’t get enough of him, he pushed my robe from my shoulders and brought our bodies flush together.

I pulled back from the kiss to glance up at him. His eyes were full of heat and desire. I wrapped my arms around his neck and offered my mouth to him again. This time, when he kissed me, his tail decided to join in. It

wrapped itself around my waist, rubbing along the edges of my hipbones, causing a delightful tingle to spread.

Along with the stimulation of his tail, he was pressed long and hard against my stomach. I wriggled in place. A low growl rumbled from his throat, and his hands left my sides to lift me up into his arms. I wrapped my legs around him and whimpered when my center brushed against the ridges of his stomach.

Shots of pleasure ripped through me as he lowered me onto the bed, making sure to rub every inch of him against my heat. Sliding one thigh to the side, he pulled away from our kiss so he could take me in. With his eyes on my skin, I could feel my face fill with heat, and I turned away from the intensity of his gaze.

“Don’t look away, love.” His voice was rough and sent shivers down my spine, but I glanced back to him beneath lowered lashes, not wanting to see his reaction to my body.

He leaned down to stroke his nose along the curve of my breast before taking my nipple in his mouth and giving it a nip. I cried out and turned my eyes to him with a glare.

“Katherine, you are the loveliest creature I have ever known.”

My eyes softened at his words.

“I’ve wanted you since the moment I set eyes on you.” His voice lowered, as did his hand. He stroked down my side, teasing my breast, before cupping me between my legs. “The smell of you has been driving me up the wall. I want to roll around in it.” His finger stroked my bud, making me gasp and groan. “Taste it.” His mouth licked at my skin. “Until all I know is you.”

I whimpered and moaned, a combination from his words and the hand that set a torturous pace. My hips lifted off the bed as I fought to get more friction. I almost cried out in frustration when he eased me back every time I tried to force his hand.

“More,” I croaked out, almost to the point of begging.

Watching my face, he replaced his finger with his thumb while he sought out my heat. Being mindful of his claws, he slid one finger into me. My insides clenched deliciously around the intrusion.

“Oh, pet,” he purred in my ear, increasing the speed of his fingers. “You’re on fire. I can’t wait to be inside of you, but first I need you to come for me, love.”

As if on his command, my body seized up, and my hands clutched the sheet beneath me. Before I could catch my breath, Chess moved over me, and with one fell swoop, slid into me. It hadn't been a long time for me, but long enough that his girth gave me an exquisite feeling of fullness.

We both moaned as we got used to the feeling. My hands found their way to his biceps, and I tilted my hips up to encourage him to move. With a dark chuckle, he shifted and pulled back until he was almost all the way out, before sliding back in with a deep groan. He found a steady pace that was just this side of not fast enough, keeping me right on the edge.

With a growl of frustration, I wrapped my legs around his waist and used my arms to help push myself against him as I tried to take control of our movements. When he caught on to what I was doing, he stopped completely, and my growl turned into a roar. He trapped my hands with his and pressed them above my head.

"So impatient. So needy," he whispered as he adjusted his stance and grabbed a hold of one of my thighs with his free hand. This time, when he pressed back into me, it was hard and punishing. I cried out with each forceful thrust.

He had me on the edge again within moments, this time, more intense than the last. And with each stroke, I felt my magic respond to the feeling as it made its way to the surface. My eyes locked with his, and I watched in awe as my skin began to glow softly. I glanced down to where our bodies touched, and his skin resonated with mine.

The magic made the pressure so much more exquisite than anything else I had ever experienced. Even more so than what I had with Dorian. When I finally shattered, my nails dug into his flesh, hard enough that there would probably be marks on his skin. He didn't seem to mind as he groaned out his own release and then collapsed next to me on the bed.

As the sweat cooled on our skin, the blinding glow dulled. I fought to catch my breath and turned to ask him if it was always like that for him, but couldn't find the energy. He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me to his chest, and I snuggled in tight as sleep overcame me.



Chapter 22

Guilt Will Eat You Alive

WHEN MY EYES fluttered open, I was happy to find myself still cuddled against the feline who had rocked my world the night before. My gaze searched out his face, and a small smile curled up to find his crystal orbs looking down on me. I ducked my head and blushed as his eyes roamed down my exposed body in the morning light.

Morning? I jerked out of his arms and glanced at the clock to see it was after ten. Brandi was going to be pissed. Jumping off the mattress, I searched for some clean clothes.

“What’s your hurry, love?” Chess purred from the bed, propping up on his elbows to give me a full view of his body and showing me he was more than happy with our arrangement.

“I’m late for work.” Turning my face away from the sight of him before I got distracted, I set to work on putting on my clothes.

“But I thought we could have a repeat of last night.” His voice deepened, reminding me of what had occurred. The prospect was tempting, but getting fired wasn’t worth it. Probably.

Ignoring the hungry look he was sending my way, I searched for my cell phone, which was buzzing like crazy. I flipped on the screen to see five missed calls and seventeen text messages.

“Ugh,” I groaned, rubbing my hand over my face. My happy feeling sank as I scrolled through the messages from Brandi.

Where are you?

You better not be late again.

Is it that boyfriend of yours? I told you that he was bad news and would hurt your career. This is how you repay me for taking a chance on you even though you don’t have the qualifications? Your mother would not approve.

The list went on and on, each one becoming more irate than the last. My eyebrows rose when a few of the messages were actually from Mrs. Jenkins, telling me the boss lady was about to lose her shit if I didn’t get my butt in there.

Just as I was about to close my phone, it buzzed again. It was another text from Brandi.

Don't bother coming in. I found someone to replace you.

Was I fired? Did she just fire me over text message? I should be angry or desperate. I should have the urge to call her back right this moment and beg for my job back. But in all honesty, I wasn't. My chest felt like a huge weight had been lifted. One less thing to worry about.

"What is it?" Chess cocked his brow.

"I think I just got fired." I grinned and then found myself laughing.

Fired. Me! Fan-fucking-tastic. I couldn't wait to tell my mother, I could just hear the lecture waiting for me. Maybe I could guilt trip her into paying my bills since she was the one who forced me to take that horrible job in the first place.

The thought of my human mother brought back memories of what had occurred with my Fae mother. Things were going to get more difficult, I was sure, but with no job to worry about, I could focus on defeating the Shadow man and keeping the realms from going to shit.

"And that is a good thing?" Chess crawled out of the bed and sauntered toward me with a playful smirk on his face.

My eyes trailed up his body, the grin on my face spreading wider. God, he was beautiful. I licked my lips as my gaze landed on his face hovering above me.

"Not as good as something else right now." My voice had turned husky.

He wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me toward him, his tail finding its favorite spot along the inside of my thigh. I slid my hands up his bare chest and tangled my hands in his hair. Grabbing a fist full, I pulled his head down to mine, but paused when his ears twitched.

Were they as soft as they looked? I couldn't help but giggle again when I imagined him thumping his leg like a dog from being scratched behind his ears. Or would he purr?

"I am unclothed and in your arms, what is there to laugh about, pet?" His bemusement showed in his face and voice.

"Your ears."

"Yes, what about them?"

Biting my lip, I reached a hand up, but paused. "Can I?"

His eyes widened a fraction, but he nodded his consent, a sort of anticipatory look filling his face. My hand inched up to his ears, and I slowly slid my fingers over them. His hands tightened on my waist, and he pulled me closer.

“Does that feel good?” I watched his face. His eyes were pinched closed, and a deep reverberation began in the center of his chest. After a moment, he opened his eyes to gaze down at me, the ferocity there created a heat that pooled in the pit of my stomach.

Instead of answering me, his tail moved up from its place and did wicked things that made me ache and moan. His claws moved into my hair, tugging me forward to claim my lips in an aggressive kiss. I continued my assault on his ears, and just as his hand inched up my shirt, a knock came to my bedroom door.

“Lady?” Alice’s bell-like voice called out.

I dropped my hands from his ears and shifted to find out what she wanted only to be tugged back by Chess. He pressed my hand to his length with a groan.

“Ignore her.”

I was inclined to do just that, but Alice usually didn’t leave the TV for just any old reason.

“It might be important.” I moved away from the tantalizing hands making their way into my clothing and reached for the door. Giving Chess one more long appreciative look, I slipped out the door and into the hallway.

The smile on my face fell flat when I saw Alice. She had used her powers to transform the yoga pants and t-shirt back into a dark blue tea dress, complete with a little hat and gloves. The change of attire wasn’t all that was worrying. The anxious expression and the way she kept looking back toward the living room made me frown harder.

“What is it, Alice?”

“You are usually at that job of yours right now, but you aren’t.” She wrung her hands together, as if not sure of her own words.

“I know. I woke up late. Not that it matters, anyway. They fired me.” I rolled my eyes and held back a snort.

“That’s good. A princess shouldn’t have to work.” The worry on her face thankfully decreased at that notion but was still there.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Well, in this world, princesses don’t get paid. Not that I could tell them I was a princess, anyway.”

“I do not know why the Fae don’t just come out, anyway. It is ridiculous that they must hide in their world.” She seemed less distracted and more focused on me now that the conversation was moving along. I wondered what had spooked her so much.

“Really? Could you imagine what would happen? I’m surprised there hasn’t been anything on the news already.” I shook my head at the thought of it. A national alert would no doubt throw the entire United States into a panic, causing them to arm up for the end of the world. No doubt shooting at Shadows would cause more trouble than need be. “I don’t think the world is ready for the Fae to come out of the closet just yet.”

“I could not agree more, but we may not have a choice.” I turned from Alice to find what she had been so nervous about. Standing at the end of the hallway was none other than my fiancé.

“Why do you say that?” I walked toward him. My eyes stayed on his form, and I tried not to look back at the bedroom door where Chess lay in wait. The last thing I needed was a confrontation between my old lover and my new one.

“I just came from the Between.” He followed me back into the living room, and he continued, “The guards are dead.”

“Dead? Not taken?” Alice spoke up, but when Dorian looked at her, she turned away.

“Not this time. Their bodies were left where they were killed. Though, some of the parts were missing.”

“Parts?” I gulped, not liking the sound of it.

“Their heads have yet to be found.” Dorian shook his head, his black hair falling into his face. “I do not know if this is some sick joke the Shadows are playing, or if it is something else altogether, but I do know that no one is manning the doors right now. So anyone could be getting into your realm.”

I twisted my hair in my hands, thinking about what he had said. If their heads were missing, it couldn’t have been the Shadows; it wasn’t really their style. Unless. It was a message to my mother. I had just trampled all over her and her guards but killing her own people didn’t make sense.

It could have been a message to my mother. Which, knowing what I knew now about what lengths she would go to for power, I had no doubt

someone would hold that kind of grudge against her. Even the Shadows.

Looking back up to Dorian, I opened my mouth to tell him my thoughts when he took a step closer to me. A weird look settled on his face.

“What is that?” He sniffed the air around me, his nose scrunching up in disgust.

Before I could figure out what the hell he was talking about, the bedroom door opened.

“While I am perfectly happy lying in your bed all day, I could do with some clothes, pet.”

I spun around to find Chess with only a sheet wrapped around his waist and a smirk on his face.

My mouth hung open like a fish as I looked back and forth between the two Fae men. I knew nothing good could come from having them both in the same room. I knew from the rage that began to cloud Dorian’s face, that there was no talking my way out of it this time.

“You slept with this — this thing?” Dorian pointed his finger at Chess. “After you told me you needed a break to figure things out!”

“I did. I do.” I sighed.

“What she means, is she needs a break from you,” Alice supplied, and then gave me a small helpful smile.

Returning her smile with a glare, I growled out, “Don’t help me.”

“Is what the girl says true?” Dorian turned his scorching glare from Chess to me.

I was tired of dancing around the truth with him.

“What Alice said is sort of true, but what I said was true as well. I am trying to figure things out. And while you are complicated, Chess, he’s...” I trailed off, gesturing to Chess, who looked like he was about to burst at the seams in glee.

“An easy fuck? Or do you mean convenient?” His lips twisted into a crude snarl.

“Yes. No.” Frustrated, I grab my hair wanting to scream.

“Then what is he?” Dorian demanded, moving a step closer into my personal space. Chess moved close as well. Looking into Chess’ face, he snarled. “What is he if not meaningless sex to you?”

Before I could even think about it, before I even knew it was there, my mouth had a life of its own, and I blurted out, “I love him, okay!”

Dead silence. I couldn't believe I had just said that, and in front of my ex, for crying out loud. I hadn't even admitted it to myself, and now here I was spouting it out for all to hear like it was no big deal.

"You love me?" Chess' voice was unsure and surprised.

Embarrassed and suddenly a bit shy, I glanced up at him. "Yeah, I do."

A dozen emotions ran across Chess' face. Happiness. Relief. Then suddenly it switched to what could be only described as fear, anger, and finally sadness. I could have sworn he was going to say it back to me, but instead, a flirty smile crept onto his face, and I knew what was going to come out of his mouth was not what I wanted to hear.

"That's so sweet. I'm flattered really." He tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear with a smile.

Anger and overwhelming confusion filled me. I shoved his clawed hand away from me and took a step back. Chess frowned at me and then leaned down to kiss my cheek.

"I'll go put some clothes on while you take care of this." He gestured to the area around Dorian and then proceeded to glide out of the room as if he hadn't just humiliated me.

The moment Chess left, Dorian turned on me. "See? What do you expect from a half-breed?"

"Dorian." Exasperated at the whole situation, I spun on him. "Just shut the fuck up, and get the hell out of my house!"

I stomped away from him, not caring what he did or said anymore. As far as I was concerned, he was my past, and the only thing I cared about was the man that had just lied to me.

I stormed into the bedroom.

"What the hell was that?" I kept my eyes on him and not on his naked behind as he surveyed his shredded clothing.

"What?" He glanced over his shoulder, a clueless expression on his face, before he sighed and dropped his clothes. "I suppose I could always glamour my clothing on until I can get some more. Unless you'd like to stay in bed all week?" He gave me a cheeky grin. "Last night was fun."

"Fun?" I gaped at him. "Was that all it was to you? Fun?"

"Of course. What did you think it was?" He shrugged and glided over to me, caging me in against the door. "Didn't you have fun?"

"I thought it meant something to you. That I meant something to you."

“You do, kitten.” He wiped a tear from my face, and I screamed at myself for leaning into it. “You’re a really great friend.” He gave me a fanged grin and slid his hands down to my waist. “Now are we going to find me some pants or get you out of—”

The more that he kept talking; the ache in my chest became a fit of rage. My fist flew through the air. I didn’t even feel it when it smashed into his face, throwing him across the room and into the farthest wall.

Not waiting to see if he was all right or still conscious, I barreled out of the room and into the living room where Mop and Trip sat with Alice. Three pairs of eyes darted around the room. Mop kept twisting his hat in a nervous gesture, while Trip tugged on his ears. Alice looked like she was about to burst into tears at any moment.

I stood there for several minutes, waiting for one of them to speak up. They all just stared at me, not speaking or explaining why they were all here.

“Well? What happened?” I growled, anger still fluttering in my chest.

They glanced at each other, a look passing across their faces, but none of them spoke.

“Come on guys, you can’t have come all the way here and not tell me what you are so frightened of.” I crossed my arms over my chest with an irritated humph.

“Lady, should not worry, Lady shouldn’t,” Trip spoke up, giving me a weak smile.

“Okay, now I am going to worry.” I turned my gaze to Mop. “What is this all about?”

“Uh,” Mop started, his eyes more strained than when I saw him last. “Maybe ye should be sittin’ down for this?”

He tried to pull me down onto the couch, but I wouldn’t have it.

“No. Tell me. What happened?” My voice rose in pitch.

Mop scratched the back of his head and looked down at the ground. “Well, ye see the thing is—”

“The prince is gone!” Alice blurted.

Mop glared at her.

“Gone? What do you mean? He was just here.” I cocked my head to the side, but a sinking feeling began in my stomach.

“Well, it started the other day,” Mop said. “He be roamin’ round the outskirts like always, Trip and I be hangin’ around on our way back to

Hatter's. Ye know, 'cause he still be acting funny, when we see it."

"See what?" I jumped in, getting impatient at his slow delivery.

"His highness, be talkin' to the mirror, his highness was," Trip stuttered, his eyes darting around the room like a skittish animal.

"So?" I didn't understand. There were plenty of mirrors in the Underground. What did it matter?

"It wouldn't normally." Mop looked off to the side, before seeming to gain his backbone back. "Except that mirror be the one in the mushroom city. The one that be goin' to the —"

"Shadow's Between." I filled in for him, that sinking feeling turned into a sledgehammer cracking at my nerves. "What was he doing there?"

Mop and Trip shrugged. "We don' be knowin'. He be more irritable lately, but most of us just be thinkin' he was havin' trouble with gettin' ye back. But we didn' think nothin' of it until on the way here we be seein' him with the mirror again. But this time, he be goin' through the mirror."

Guilt began to eat at me. I'd told him I didn't want to see him anymore. That I needed a break. And then he found out about Chess. But I didn't think that would cause him to do something so reckless as to join the Shadows, but maybe he did. I didn't know this Dorian; he might be that rash, that stupid to be coaxed in by the Shadow man. I knew his pull, and even I had been tempted to say yes.

"Lady?" Alice touched my arm. "What are we going to do?"

I shook myself from my stupor and locked my eyes on her. "What do you think we are going to do? He may not be my betrothed anymore, but we can't very well let the Shadows have him. No matter how much a pain in the ass he is."

"But how?" Alice had dropped her glamour and was back to the yoga pants and t-shirt, and she was using the edge of the t-shirt sleeve as a tissue. So much for being ladylike.

I opened my mouth to tell her I didn't really know when a voice cried out. Then the sound of glass shattering came from the direction of my bedroom, the bedroom where Chess was laid out unconscious. I darted from the living room and threw open the bedroom door.

The carpet of the bedroom was covered in glass from the floor length mirror and the wood that covered my window was smashed to pieces. But that wasn't what caused my heart to thud in my chest as if it were about to

burst out at any moment. Things could be replaced. Damage could be undone.

The thing that made me crumble to the floor and all my anger dissipate in a wave of despair was an empty presence of one Cheshire S. Cat. In his place was a trail of blood leading out the window and a note. A note with two words written in sharp, elaborate handwriting.

You're ready.



Epilogue

Dorian

MY INSIDES WERE frozen. A deep aching void that screamed in my head to be filled. I knew the Shadows had lied, or at least bent the truth. I should have known better, should have been more prepared. Their voice had called my name from the dark in that slightly off-kilter voice. I could not tell if they were serious, or just having a laugh at my expense, but I was more than tempted to take their offer.

I would have liked to have said I had the strength to tell them no right away, but it would be a lie. My heart was too weak from years of servitude, and then when Lynne came back only to be someone else, it was just too much.

A different face on the soul I loved. The soul I still longed for to this day. Katherine. Or Kat, as she kept reminding me in the sharp, irritated tone she seemed to reserve only for me.

I did not love her. Not the little human playing pretend, but I did love Lynne. And I would see her every once in a while when she looked at me with those blue eyes I dreamed of waking up to. But the human part of her was suffocating her.

I could have loved her if given the chance. But it was hard to get to know someone who did not want to know you. Who, while they said they were sorry, and knew I did nothing wrong, still looked at me with judgment in their eyes.

The woman I loved would never have let a half-breed anywhere near her. Let alone open her legs to him. Open her heart to him.

I was jealous. As much as I denied my love of the human girl, I was still jealous of what the feline had. I missed the touch of her skin and the smell of her hair. She had integrated herself into my very being even without my knowledge.

Seeing them together. Smelling her marked with his scent. It was enough to drive the strongest man to drastic measures.

So, when the Shadows called out to me, while I was away licking my wounds, I did not hesitate more than a moment. Their words held so much

promise. So much logic to their plea.

I would not be bound by the same rules anymore. I would be like her and with it, I would be able to take her and the Underground back from the Seelie Queen's clutches.

There may be separate realms, but it was no secret to those who had been in the Underground for the last hundred years who really had the control. My mother was not as strong as she used to be. My father's death and my banishment had destroyed most of the fire in her.

But that would change.

It would all change when we took back this world and all other worlds. I would let the Shadows use me to fulfill their revenge, but I would be the one who ruled in the end. I would have my kingdom and my queen by my side. Whether she liked it or not. And that half-breed would end up exactly where he should have when he was born: on the darkest abyss of the reaper's tomb.

The End



CHASING PRINCES



Chapter 1

Consequences

MY PALMS WERE sweating and my heart raced as my eyes trained on the kitchen table where my cell phone sat, waiting for me to have the guts to pick it up. Sitting in one of my grandmother's mismatched chairs, I chided myself for being such a wuss.

Get it together, Kat. What would Alice think if she saw you now?

Alice, for a lack of a better word, was sloppy. For someone who grew up in a time where it was all about refinement and propriety, once the human turned Fae was allowed to let her hair down, she went all out.

Clothing was strewn everywhere, dishes left in the sink, and the potato chips. I have never seen anyone eat as many chips as that woman did. For all her faults, it didn't keep her from losing the snotty attitude she came with.

Fortunately, she was not there to see what a wet fish, as she would say, I was being. It was just a silly phone call, one that I dreaded, but was necessary for the survival of not just Alice, but me as well.

Snatching the phone up before I could talk myself out of it again, I punched the speed dial for my parent's house.

"Please don't let Mom pick up. Please," I muttered to myself as the phone rang in my ear. I waited. After the sixth ring, I was sure they weren't going to pick up, and I would be forced to wait until later to get the courage to do it all over again, but on the seventh ring, a familiar stern voice answered.

"Nottingham Residence."

"Hillary!" I could almost cry at the sound of her permanently grumpy voice. "How are you?"

"I am well, Katherine. What do you want?" Her voice had a sharp, no nonsense sting to it. I'd have been offended if it wasn't just the way Hillary was.

"Actually, I was calling to talk to my dad. Is he around?" I chewed on the nail of my thumb as I waited for her to answer.

“Yes, I will get him. Hold —” A voice in the background cut her off and then she said the words I dreaded to hear, “Here’s your mother.”

My heart tightened in my chest and a stutter-filled my voice, “No. Wait. I’ll call back-” I tried to get out before she handed the phone over, but I was too late.

“Katherine, so nice of you to call after all this time.”

“Hello, Mom,” I grumbled. “And it hasn’t been that long.”

“Two weeks is a long time to an old woman like myself.” She sniffed over the phone. “Your father and I were starting to worry you would never call. Though, I have no idea why you are the one who so rudely darted out on dinner like the devil himself was on your heels.”

Gritting my teeth, I clutched the edge of the table in front of me. The night she was talking about was not a fond one. It was the night that Chess had met my family, and like all my family gatherings, it ended with me feeling like complete and utter trash. It was my mother’s fault as usual but trying to explain that to her was a wasted effort that I didn’t really have time for.

“I’m sorry I ruined dinner, but that isn’t what I called for.”

“Well then, what did you call for?” My mother hummed at me. “It better not be to help you find another job after you got yourself fired from the last one. I’ve used up most of my favors in this town for you already.”

The reminder of my recent unemployment stung and only served to remind me why the call was so important.

“No, Mom. I don’t need another job.”

“Then you found one already?” her voice was filled with sarcastic glee. I didn’t know why she bothered asking when she knew I had done no such thing. Word traveled fast in our town, and if I had a new job, she would have known before I did.

“No, not yet.” I crossed one leg over the other, kicking the bottom of the table in an effort to relieve some of my anxiety.

My mother gave an impatient sigh, and I could practically see her roll her eyes at me through the phone. “Well, Katherine, I don’t know how you are going to survive without a job. There is still money in the account we opened under your name from when you were younger. Not that you ever used it.” She snorted. “It’s not a bad thing to have money, dear. You shouldn’t feel bad about relying on your parents that’s what we are here for.”

I was actually shocked she had even brought up giving me money. That was the exact reason I had called, and the fact that she was offering it up to me without having to pull teeth made me suspicious.

“That would be helpful.” My words were cautious and questioning. “But what do you want in return?”

“Return?” My mother’s voice hit a higher pitch, and I definitely knew she wanted something. “Why can’t a mother just give her daughter the support she needs without wanting anything in exchange?”

“Because, this is you we’re talking about, Mom. Not Mother Teresa.” The back door opened and I looked up from the table to see Alice float in.

Gone were the yoga pants, in their place were a pair of black dress pants and a light blue blouse, which really brought out the color of her eyes. It had taken some work, but I had finally gotten her away from the daytime television, and out into the human world.

I pointed at the phone and mouthed, “Mom.” Alice nodded her head in understanding before moving to the refrigerator. Grabbing a bottle of water, she sat down at the table opposite me and waited.

“Well,” my mother continued, “Now that you mention it, Margery down at the city council is looking for an assistant for her new group she is forming against this outbreak of creatures.” The way she said the word creatures didn’t hide her disdain in the slightest.

It started with the faeries and then my mother using that sweet troll, Bar. But not long after that, Fae began pouring out of the Underground like it was on fire. I hadn’t been back since my confrontation with my mother in her throne room, it very well could be.

It was quickly discovered that the portal in the woods behind my house was not the only portal to our world. The door in the Between could lead to anywhere in the world, and the Fae took that opportunity to make their presence known. And at the center of the outpour was our little town.

When I asked Alice why they would want to come here of all places when they could go anywhere in the world, she had just looked at me like I was stupid.

“Wouldn’t you want to be near the one with the most power?” She’d asked as if it was clear as day who she was talking about.

The Fae kept reminding me that I was the savior, the one that would be the end of the shadows and ruler of their world. I wasn’t even sure I could rule myself, let alone a whole kingdom.

“Those creatures are called Fae, Mom. They’ve already said so on the news, you could at least give them their proper name if you are going to be prejudice.” I shared a look with Alice who rolled her eyes.

“Prejudice! Katherine Marie, don’t you dare call me prejudice. I have no problem with any *human* of another race, religion, or sexual orientation. But these aren’t humans. They’re monsters!” Her voice rose to the screeching pitch that made my ears ring. “Have you even seen some of these so-called Fae? They’re little more than animals. Just this morning there was one on the Ellen show with huge feet and bulbous eyes. And those fangs! Hillary had to turn off the television before I fainted.” She paused in her rant. “They are not people, Katherine. They are monsters, and they must be eradicated.” My mother let out a deep breath and seemed to compose herself. “So, I will let Margery know you will be down tomorrow to help her with the rally.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I snapped.

“I don’t see why you are so set on accepting these things. What does Chess think of all this? He seemed like such a nice man, certainly, he sees the right way of things.”

“I wouldn’t know. I haven’t seen him.” At the mention of Chess, something sharp pinched in my chest.

It was true; I hadn’t seen Chess, not since he was taken by the Seelie Queen. I had no doubt her taking him was a power play, a way to punish me for my actions in her court.

“What do you mean you haven’t seen him? Don’t tell me you two broke up already?” My mother scoffed. “You really need to learn to hold on to a man or you’ll never be as happy as your sister is with Simon.”

“We weren’t dating to begin with, so it doesn’t matter.” I shrugged, my eyes began to burn, and I turned from Alice so she wouldn’t see my distress.

Chess’ capture notwithstanding, we hadn’t been on the best of terms when he was taken. When a girl tells a guy she loves him, she expects at least some kind of response. An ‘I love you too’ or a ‘Go to hell’, but Chess wasn’t like other men. He was a Fae, and a womanizing Fae at that. I should have expected the nonchalant response he had given me.

Wasn’t it me who kept claiming we were just friends? Why should sleeping together make that any different? My declaration had done nothing but solidify my reasoning as to why I needed to stay away from men

altogether. So far they had done nothing but make my life more complicated. My first love as a Fae was a prime example of my failure in the relationship department.

“Well, you should call him up and try to work it out. Your father and I really liked him, and he seemed to adore you. Men like that are hard to find.”

My mother’s praise of Chess made me laugh. She, who was just ranting about the creatures, was half in love with one herself. I was half tempted to burst her little bubble and let her know exactly what kind of man Cheshire S. Cat was.

Alice placed her hand on mine, and I glanced up at her with a small smile. “I’ll take it under advisement. I really need to go now, Mom. Will you have a new card issued to me for the account?” I held my breath as I waited for her to respond.

I had no inclination to join their hate rally, especially since I was mostly Fae myself. How would it look, the Seelie Princess supporting the extermination of her own kind? The thought of it was so ironic I almost wanted to go to the event just to see what would happen.

“Yes, yes of course. I can’t have my daughter starving, now can I? But you’ll think about the rally? I mean, you don’t have to participate but a show of support would make a world of difference.”

“I can’t make any promises, but I’ll think about it. Bye, Mom.” I clicked the phone off and dropped my head to the table with a thud. Wincing at the dull pain in my head, I looked to Alice. “So, how did it go?”

“Not very well, I am sorry to say.” Alice laced her fingers together on the table as prim as could be. Even dressed like a modern woman, she still couldn’t get past her late 1800s upbringing.

I grunted and glared down at the table. Things were not looking good for us.

While exploring the modern human world, Alice had come across several other Fae who, like her, were stuck in this realm with no other choice but to try to make the best of it. In a few short days, she had formed a coalition of Underground creatures. This collective was mostly made up of lower Fae who had fled from the outskirts but among them were also some high Fae of both Seelie and UnSeelie descent. Nothing like a mass murderer on the loose to bring opposing sides together.

“I did figure out where Cheshire is being held, though,” Alice continued, causing me to perk my head up.

“You did?”

“Yes. Though you aren’t going to like it.” She leaned back in her chair and pursed her lips.

“I don’t particularly like anything right now. Just tell me.” I already had an idea of where my mother was holding Chess, but I hadn’t had anyone confirm it as of yet. Everyone had been pretty leery of me in general. When you pull a power play in a room full of people word gets out fast, and the word was to stay the fuck out of my way. Not like I was complaining, but it did make getting information harder.

“He’s not in the dungeon—”

“Then he must be in the Hall of Mirrors,” I interrupted. “Of course that nasty bitch would throw him there.” I shook my head with a frown. “I don’t know how she even managed it with the Shadow man prowling around, not unless she has some other way in then I know of.”

“He’s not there either.” Alice shook her head, her blonde locks whipping around her face.

My brow scrunched down at her words. If he wasn’t in the dungeon or the Hall of Mirrors where else could he be? While Chess and I might have had a falling out, it didn’t mean I wanted him to rot somewhere. Knowing my mother, and how she felt about half-breeds, in general, there was no doubt that she had made wherever Chess was as horrid as possible.

Alice must have seen the distress on my face, because she placed her hand on top of mine and gave it a pat. “Don’t worry we will save him, you’ll see. You’re the Queen of the Underground after all.”

“I wish people would stop calling me that!” I spat out, irritation filling me. “One little show of power and everyone goes crazy. I can’t even get it to happen again, at least not to that extent.”

“Have you been practicing lately?” She cocked her head to the side.

I chewed on my lip before responding, “Kind of.”

“Meaning not at all.” Alice sighed and stood from the table. “You can’t keep denying who you are forever. People are relying on you. *I* am relying on you.” She placed her hand on her chest. “If you can’t accept your powers and get them under control, who else is going to save Chess from the Bandersnatch?”

“Bandersnatch?” I sputtered. “But that is just a stupid monster made up by that asshole Lewis.”

Alice shifted in her seat, uncomfortable by the mention of her ex-lover and my foul language. Though, living with me I would think she would be used to it by now.

“Not completely.” She looked down at her feet now, not meeting my eyes.

“Alice.” Her gaze snapped up at the commanding tone of my voice. “What does that mean?”

“While the Bandersnatch in his book isn’t real. There really is a Bandersnatch in the Underground that is really real.” She held her hands up gesturing as she talked.

“That makes no sense whatsoever.” I shook my head. “It’s either real or it isn’t. It can’t be both.”

Alice placed her hands on her hips with a huff. “Stop thinking like a human. Not everything is so black and white as all that. The Bandersnatch is not a thing, it’s a place.”

“Okay,” I drew out. “Then where is this Bandersnatch?”

“In the Seelie Queen’s bedroom, of course.”



Chapter 2

Switching Sides

“WATCH WHERE YOU are swinging those!” Alice ducked as a vine swung out from the eggplant I was trying to maneuver around my backyard.

“Sorry.” Gritting my teeth, I tried to focus on the wobbly, purple vegetable whose chicken legs were not sprouting fear in anyone’s heart. “It’s not as easy as it looks.”

Apparently, controlling plant life when not in a life or death situation was much more of a daunting task than one would think. Just getting the eggplant to walk around the garden was more of a challenge than it should have been.

I had created one badass tree monster that had taken out a dozen guards. It couldn’t be that hard to replicate, could it?

Focusing on the power surging out of me, I searched out the creature I had created, and directed it toward the vegetable’s feet. It stopped chasing Alice only to swing its long vines and wrap them around her waist.

“Stop! Let me go,” the blonde screeched, struggling to get out of the eggplant’s tight grip. “Lady, tell it to stop!”

“I’m trying,” I growled. With my eyes locked on the magic pouring out of me, I didn’t hear the gasp that came from behind me until it was too late.

“Katherine. You’re...you’re one of them.” My mother’s voice caused me to lose my focus as my eyes jerked to her petrified face.

“Shit.” The loss of concentration meant that my creature decided to take on a mind of its own and, for whatever reason, quickly began to spin in circles, swinging a screaming Alice with it.

“Hold on,” I snapped and turned back to the rampaging vegetable.

Instead of redirecting the vegetable, I yanked my magic back from it, the green veins of magic quickly returned into my skin. Out of breath, I dropped onto the ground with a huff; leaving Alice sprawled out on the ground. As a half-breed, I was able to exert more power than most Fae, but it seemed like nowadays, even the smallest bit of magic wore me out and animating vegetation was no small feat.

“Maybe we should take a break?” Alice suggested, adjusting her hair while she dusted off her pants. When she saw we had company she stopped her fiddling and looked to me for guidance.

Standing from the ground, I didn’t bother dusting off myself as I turned to my mother, who was frozen in place.

“Mom, what are you doing here?” I took a step toward her but stopped when she stepped back as well, fear filling her eyes.

She shook her head at me, one hand up and then in a blink of an eye that fear turned to anger, and she was stomping toward me. “Who are you? What have you done with my daughter?” My mother pointed a French manicured finger at my chest.

I shrugged. “Nowhere. I’m right here, where I’ve always been.”

I probably could have tried to appease her more, tried harder to explain, but I was tired of hiding and even more tired of trying to explain myself to those closest to me. Shouldn’t she love me the way I am no matter what?

Her lips pursed together in a thin line as she looked at me and Alice, and then down to the creature that had shriveled back into a regular, old, eggplant. After a moment or two, her eyes narrowed back onto me.

“Don’t think you can fool me, whoever you are. I know what I saw, and I won’t be treated like an insolent child.” She jerked her hand at the purple eggplant lying deserted on the ground.

“Mom, you are being silly.” I crossed my arms over my chest and tapped my foot. “No one is treating you like a child.”

“Don’t call me that.” She bared her teeth at me, snarling.

“Don’t call you what?” I cocked my head to the side. “Silly?”

“Mom.” My mother snapped at me, her eyes full of fire. “You are not my daughter. You have no right to call me that.”

Taken aback by how viciously she had responded, I wasn’t quite sure what to do. My mother had never shown me this side of her. I knew she could be as brutal as the rest of them when it came to something she wanted, but I had never been on the receiving end of it.

Not really able to help myself, I decide to poke the snake. “Well, if that’s the case, I suppose I don’t have to come to dinner anymore. Than Margery won’t need me to call her. You know, since I’m not your daughter and all.” I smirked and watched as my mother’s face began to turn a kind of

purple eggplant color from her rage. “I guess that also means that I can color my hair whatever I want, since you know, I’m not your daughter.”

To prove my point, I let my magic ripple over me, changing my white blonde hair into a neon purple.

Picking up the ends of my hair to examine it, I glanced over at Alice. “What do you think? Does it suit me? Maybe I’ll keep it like this when I go to the protest?” My mother gasped in horror as I tried not to grin. “You don’t think anyone would care, do you? I mean, I’m not your daughter, so what I do doesn’t affect you in any way.”

Growling, my mother crossed her arms. “You’ve made your point.”

“Have I?” I cocked my head to the side and waited. When she nodded, I let go of the glamour with a sigh. “I really didn’t expect you to give in so fast, Mom. It’s not like you.”

She flinched when I called her mom again. Maybe she hadn’t accepted me completely.

“Well,” she snapped. “You gave me little choice, and besides, only my daughter would have the audacity to threaten me with purple hair. If you’d been an imposter you would be trying to appease me, not drive me into an early grave.”

“Ah, Mom, that’s so sweet.” I clutched my heart in mock adoration.

“Don’t start with me, Katherine.” She narrowed her eyes, and then turned to Alice as if she had just noticed she was there. “I know you? You’re that woman everyone’s talking about. Gathering the creatures together. What was your name again?”

“Alice.” The blonde Fae supplied, pressing her mouth into a thin line. She didn’t seem to like my mother’s reference to the creatures any more than I did.

“Yes, that’s it.” My mother nodded her head and then dismissed Alice as easily as she had started, turning back to me. “Really, Katherine. I don’t understand what is happening at all. You’re human. How can you even be one of them?” Her nose scrunched up in disgust, and her eyes strayed back to Alice, who glared, and crossed her arms over her chest.

I rubbed my temple and sighed. I didn’t really want to get into the long complicated story that was my existence.

“Would you believe me if I said that there is Fae blood in our family?” I offered up, hoping it would satisfy her need to know the details.

“Nonsense.” She sniffed. “There is no possible way that any of the Nottingtons would ever be with one of those creatures. We are pure.”

“Are you sure about that?” I raised an eyebrow at her, ignoring the fact that her comment was as racist as they came. “Maybe grandmother, or one of the great-grandmothers had a Fae lover we don’t know about.”

My mother opened her mouth to protest, but then closed it with a snap as her brow crinkled. She must have thought of someone that was likely to have that kind of relationship and not tell anyone about it. But if she knew anything she wasn’t telling. Her face smoothed out and a stern frown covered her features.

“Not that I am aware of. Anyways,” she opened her handbag and pulled out a thin card, “I just came by to give you this. Since it will be a few weeks until you can get one of your own.”

I reached out my hand and accepted the card, a little part of me danced with glee when I saw it was a debit card to the account we had talked about. I locked eyes with Alice, trying not to grin like a crazy person.

“Now that is for essentials, bills, food, and the like.” My mother shot us a look. “*Not* for housing those creatures in your grandmother’s house.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I went to hug her, but she held her hands up to ward me off.

“No hugs, dear. You are covered in dirt. Now that you have the card, I have to be going. I need to let Margery know that the Nottingtons will not be coming to the protest.” She smoothed her hands down her outfit and gave an exasperated sigh. “I suppose I’ll have to tell your father. Though, I have no doubt he will be more pleased than surprised. He always did like the strange and unusual. I’m sure he will want to talk to you about it. Do try and keep the theatrics to a minimum. Being one of them is one thing, but showing it off to the world is another. Besides, who knows what the government will decide in the next few months. You don’t want to end up in some kind of lab being experimented on, do you?”

“Of course not, Mom.” I nodded my head in agreement. I had no ambitions to tell the world of my new status. The fewer people who knew the better in my book. If the Seelie Queen had anything to say about it, I wouldn’t be around much longer for it to matter.

That thought made my heart heavy and my eyes burn. I had the sudden urge to hug my mom but restrained myself. No need to make her worry

more than she already was. I didn't even know if the spell really would kill me, or if it was just Chess being dramatic.

"All right. I'm off. It was good to meet you...Alice." She gave a small nod and left.

Alice eyed my mother's retreating back and turned to me with a frown. "We should probably stop for the day."

"That's probably a good idea." I sat on the back steps of my grandmother's house and sighed.

I'd been house sitting for her for a few months now, and there was still no sign that she would be back from her sabbatical in Florida. Not that I was in any hurry for her to return. There was still a gaping hole in her house that I hadn't even begun to figure out how to explain to a carpenter. I was lucky my mom had come around the opposite side of the house and not by my room. Or I would have had more than just a small fit to deal with.

"I'm sorry about your mother. Are you all right?" Alice slid down onto the step next to me in a move so graceful I would never have been able to pull it off.

"What do you mean?" I placed my head on my hand and angled my face toward her.

Her bright blue eyes squinted at me as if trying to figure me out. "Besides, your mother showing up you didn't seem like yourself today. Certainly less focused." She gestured to the abandoned eggplant on the other side of the garden.

"Just distracted is all." I sighed and dragged a hand through my hair.

"Thinking about Chess?"

"No!" I snapped and then frowned at the knowing look she gave me at my quick response. "I mean, not really. It's a lot of things." Mainly Chess. "Why should I care about him anyways? He certainly doesn't care about me."

"You can't just leave him there." Alice placed her hand on my arm, and I shrugged it off to stare hard at the ground.

It wasn't that I didn't want to save Chess. I did. My heart hurt just thinking about anything bad happening to him, but there was also another part of me that still ached from the words he had said.

Flattered. He had been flattered that I loved him. I was a good friend. Thinking about the words made my anger ignite all over again.

Had I been just some kind of sick game for him? See how long it took to get the Seelie Princess to fall for him before ripping her insides out and smashing them on the floor? If any other guy had done that to me I would say fuck them and be on my merry way, but the Bandersnatch...

“What exactly is the Bandersnatch?” I glanced at Alice out of the corner of my eye. “You said it’s a place, right? What kind of place? And how is it in my mother’s bedroom?”

“The how I can’t help you with but the what...” She trailed off. “Well I don’t really know what it is exactly either.”

“Then how do you know anything about it to begin with? Carroll couldn’t have made it all up in his head if he hadn’t have heard at least part of it from you,” I pointed out.

Alice stood from the stairs and began to pace. With her hands behind her back, her plaited blonde hair swung with every step she took. The dark charcoal of her pants and her light blue blouse made her seem like she had just come out of a business meeting and was ready to head back at any moment. It was weird how she had so easily let herself merge with the human world when she finally got out of her shell. Better than me for sure.

“Alice?” I stood up and placed a hand on her arm, halting her pacing. “What is it?”

She glanced up at me with sadness in her eyes. “I told Carroll of the Bandersnatch, it’s true, but I was only trying to sound important. Like my adventures were more fantastical than they were. So, I may have told a fib or two to make him think the Bandersnatch was a creature, when I really don’t know anything about it at all.”

My brow scrunched down in confusion. “Then where did you even hear about it if you don’t know anything about it? How do you know it’s a place and not a creature?”

“The where I just learned from the group. But how I knew before?” She paused; several emotions crossed her face at once. I almost thought she wasn’t going to answer before she began again.

“I really shouldn’t. It’s not my story to tell.” The blonde chewed on her lip in an unladylike fashion that was out of character for her. “He would be so cross with me if I went back on my word. No I must, I can’t, but you should know.” She nodded her head at me; her train of thought seemed to be spiraling down a hole. “You really should. Maybe he could tell you then he would forgive me for even saying anything at all? But would he even

want to see me?” She began pacing again, her hands reaching up to touch her hair. “I don’t look like myself anymore, would he even recognize me?”

I grabbed a hold of her shoulders and turned her toward me. “Who Alice? Who?”

The blue of her eyes glistened as unshed tears threatened to fall. The anguish on her face was so heartbreaking I wished I hadn’t asked. But I had to know.

When she finally answered me it was in a voice so quiet that I had to strain to hear her.

“Hatter.”



Chapter 3

Alice's Heart

SITTING ON THE couch next to Alice in the living room, I pushed the box of Kleenex toward her. One thing I had learned about having the ex-human as a roommate was she was over dramatic and a bit emotional. With the way she was looking now, without even saying anything, meant crying was inevitable.

"Take a deep breath, it will make it easier." I patted the blonde on the back, trying my best to be comforting. I was getting tired of being the comforter; I wanted a bit of sympathy too. I was the one who was doomed.

"All right." Alice hiccupped and breathed in deep before letting it out. She turned to me with a small, wilting smile. "I think I'm ready to talk about it now."

"Good. So about the Bandersnatch," I started in.

"Oh no. I cannot tell you about that until you hear the whole story." Alice shook her head at me.

"The whole story?"

"Yes. How I came to the Underground in the first place. If you don't know how Hatter was before, you won't understand how he is now." Anguish filled her voice, and it made my heart hurt for her and Hatter. She clearly cared for him, even if she hadn't said as much.

"But didn't you tell Carroll your whole story? I've already read the book and so have you." I gestured to the book that was sitting on the coffee table in front of us.

When Alice first came to live with me I had been skeptical that she would be able to deal with being back in the human world. But she had surprised me time and time again. First with her weird obsession with reality shows, and then the one eighty she did when the fleeing Fae needed guidance. She didn't hesitate to step up and take charge. Sometimes I felt like she would be better off being the princess than I ever would be.

"Yes, I know all that. But like with the Bandersnatch, I didn't exactly tell the whole truth." She flipped her hair over her shoulder and her lips quirked up in a mischievous smile. "A woman has to have her secrets."

“Okay.” My eyebrows rose at her statement, I wasn’t sure I really wanted to know what really happened when she went to the Underground, but I didn’t think I would be able to get the information I needed if I didn’t let her do it her way. “So, what happened then?”

Alice sat up straighter on the couch and placed her hand primly in her lap as if she hadn’t been torn to pieces at the thought of telling Hatter’s secret. Being Fae had certainly made her more than a little mad.

“So, it is true that I fell down a rabbit hole chasing after a rabbit in a waistcoat. Of course, that didn’t happen here where your hole is but over in England.” She placed a finger up to her chin, tapping it. “And he wasn’t really a rabbit now that I think about it but more like our friend Trip. He said his name was Watch, but I never did find out why he was named that. Do you suppose he is related to Trip?” She glanced at me in question. “Maybe we could ask him next time he comes by?”

“Maybe,” I said simply not wanting to get too far off topic. “So, how old were you when you went to the Underground the first time?” I drew on my old memories, trying to place when I’d seen Alice before. “I think I only met you once or twice, and both times you were a different age, and the last time...” I trailed off not wanting to bring up old mistakes.

More polite than I could ever be, Alice ignored my reference and answered, “Ten, if I remember correctly. I had just snuck away from my nanny because she was being horrid. Who wants to spend the day learning arithmetic’s when the weather was so lovely?”

“The thought,” I agreed, letting my sarcasm bleed into my voice. I wouldn’t need the weather as an excuse not to do math. The fact that I breathed air was reason enough for me.

“Exactly.” She nodded her head. “So, you know the part about falling down the hole bit, and then the talking doorknob I made up, because really, how boring is it that there is a reception desk to the Underground?” Alice snorted, and I couldn’t really argue with her.

The doors to the Underground sat in a world between worlds which was given the uncreative name of the Between. There you must sign in with Type and Gripe, the two-headed grumpy sisters that could quite literally bite your head off. There were even keys issued to those who wished to travel between worlds. It was all very civilized and modern, but nowadays it looked more like a battlefield than a way station.

The thought of the destroyed doors and what was left of the reception desk caused a shiver to slide down my spine. I wasn't looking forward to seeing the creatures behind that destruction again.

"So, the reception became a talking door. What else?" I sat back in my seat; I had a feeling this was going to take a while.

"Well, unlike the story I spun to Carroll, I actually ended up getting into the Underground by a talent that I'm not very proud of." She blushed and looked down at her clasped hands.

"What?" I sat up now, actually getting interested in her story.

"Pickpocketing," she muttered and blushed deeper. "I stole the key from the sisters all right. It was low and unkind, but they kept going on and on about needing a key and needing to sign in, so I just did it."

I couldn't help the little giggle that came out of me at her confession. Pickpocketing. Alice? It was hard to believe the prim and proper woman before me could do anything as childish as picking someone's pocket.

"It's not funny." Alice crossed her arms over her chest and pouted. "I've felt guilty about it ever since it happened, and I had hoped to apologize to the sisters and return their key, but you never gave it back to me, and now they are missing too!" She shot me a nasty look.

"Don't blame me." I pointed at my chest with a shake of my head. "I didn't lose the key, the dumb tree took it from me. I passed out and when I woke up, I was in the Seelie Palace; the key nowhere in sight."

Alice frowned, her brow scrunching together in thought. "I wonder where it went then."

"Probably still there at the bottom of the tree," I reasoned.

"Do you think so?" She pressed her fingertips to her mouth and stared hard at the coffee table. "If we could get back to the tree and get that key, then I could give it back to the sisters." She smiled at me as if I had answered all her prayers before a split second later her face crumbled. "But what does it matter if they are gone? And it's not like the key will do anything now anyways with the doors blasted to pieces. Oh, I'll never get to apologize now."

I shoved the box of Kleenex toward the blubbering Alice and sighed. Already crying and we weren't even to the good parts. I wondered if I still had some wine in the kitchen. Maybe if I plied her with enough alcohol she would be more comfortable. Though, if she was used to faerie wine, it

could very well leave me as the only one intoxicated. At the moment, that certainly wasn't a bad thing.

"It's all right, Alice." I made soothing, shushing, noises at the crying Fae. "I'm sure you will find a way to pay them back just like you are trying to help Chess by telling me about Hatter."

I held my breath and hoped my subtle hint to try to veer her back on track would go unnoticed.

"Hatter?" She looked up from her tissue. "Oh yes, we were getting to that, weren't we?" She dabbed her eyes and blew her nose in a manner that made me force back a noise of disgust.

"So, I met so many creatures and amazing Fae, but none of them stood out quite like Hatter." Her eyes lit up with a happy sparkle. "He wasn't like the other Fae I had met. All kinds of talking animals and beasts. Well, you know what I mean."

I nodded; I certainly knew what it was like. Brownies, two-headed birds, opalaughts, and Satyrs. The last made a small part of me quiver in fear, but I shook the thought away. I wasn't there anymore, and besides, I was a bad ass magical being now, I would never be anyone's victim again.

"So you only went to the UnSeelie Court?" I asked pushing my unpleasant memories to the back of my mind.

"Of course. Could you imagine your mother letting a human in her court?" She gave me a pointed look. "If I had stepped one foot in there she would have thrown me in the Hall of Mirrors a lot sooner."

"Something has been bugging me about that," I interrupted her from continuing. "If the Hall of Mirrors' entrance is in the Shadow's Between, and the doors are encased in iron, how does she get any of you in there? Only a half-breed could pass between the mirrors, and no one with Fae blood could touch the iron without getting burned. Not unless they had some kind of hazmat suit."

The image of the Seelie Queen, or some other High Fae dressed in a large yellow suit, made a small smile crawl onto my face.

"I don't know what a hazmat suit is but I do know how I got in there." She gave me a curious look.

"How?"

"There was a man. Or at least I think he was a man." She tilted her head to the side and seemed to think on it. "He was covered in black from head to toe in some kind of billowing cloak. He didn't talk, but he was tall

and had a sort of ominous presence about him. He reminded me of those men who handle funerals?”

The man she described in conjecture with the conversation I had with my mother before, left no doubt in my mind that the man was the Reaper. No one but my mother and me knew anything about my mother’s deal with the harbinger of death. There was no way it was a coincidence.

“So back to Hatter.” I pushed the thought of the Reaper to the back of my mind to think on later, and focused on what I needed right now.

“Yes.” Alice scooted forward in her seat at his name. “Hatter wasn’t like the others. He didn’t treat me like a child.” She paused and a small smile crept up on her face. “He listened to me when I spoke, and talked to me like I was an equal, and not a lowly human. He...” she trailed off, her hand reaching up and touching her lips.

“Alice?” I smiled at the look on her face as she dropped her hand with a small blush. “Did something happen with Hatter?”

“What? Of course not.” Alice ducked her head so I couldn’t see her expression, though the red on her face seemed to spread from her cheeks to her neck.

“Do you like him?”

“Well, of course I like him. He is one of my dearest friends.” She looked up from her lap, a sharp look in her eyes, daring me to contradict her.

I couldn’t help but smirk at how obvious it was that she was hiding behind her friendship with Hatter. So that’s why she was so worried about how he would react to her telling me.

“Then how is Hatter different now? How did the Bandersnatch change him?” I plied her for more information, hoping maybe I’d find out not just what I needed to know, but maybe she’d let something else slip about her own relationship with the stern-faced Fae.

A wave of sadness covered her face. “It’s just terrible. It is like all of the light and joy was torn out of him. He doesn’t laugh or play. Hatter won’t talk about it, not even with me. He used to tell me everything too. My heart just doesn’t reach his anymore.”

Her voice broke and I patted her back as she began to cry once more. I had heard of criminals coming out if prison changed, but I’d never heard of a place literally tearing the light from them. Was that even possible? The Hatter I saw didn’t seem like someone who had ever known a day of joy in

his life, let alone be someone that Alice would love, and I had no doubt that she loved him. Though, a bitter part of me grumbled about her and Dorian when she had someone of her own.

“Do you think,” she hiccupped, “He will ever be the same as before?”

I sighed. “I don’t know. Some things take time. But the good thing is you’re Fae! You have several lifetimes to get there,” I pointed out with a smile.

“If the shadows don’t kill us all first,” she mumbled.

“Enough doom and gloom.” Dropping my hands from her, I grabbed the remote and switched on the T.V. “Let’s watch some baby mama tear a new one into some poor shmuck. Huh?”

She sniffed and wiped her nose, nodding.

We both turned to the television, but instead of screaming couples, we were looking at a breaking news report with the headline ‘Aliens? Demons? Or something else?’ A dark haired reporter stood in front of a crowd of people surrounding a podium where the president stood preparing to make a speech.

“I’m Amanda Newton, bringing you breaking news from the White House. The president himself will be answering our questions concerning the new rush of magical creatures, known as the Fae. However, the truth remains to be uncovered. Some say they are aliens from another planet, some radicals are calling them demons, but maybe they are something else altogether? We hope to find out now, here, at the White House.”

The camera panned to the president as he addressed the crowd.

“The creatures known as Fae are here temporarily until their home can once more be called safe. They mean us no harm. We should welcome them with open arms. Anyone who is caught trying to abuse our visitors will be brought up on charges.” The president glanced beside him to someone out of the cameras range; an adoring expression filled his face.

“Mr. President,” a reporter called out from the crowd.

“Yes?” He pointed to them.

“What proof do you have that these Fae are not a threat and are not here to stay? How can the American people sleep at night knowing their families are safe with these creatures running around the country unopposed?”

Even though I was one of those Fae running around, I wanted to hear what the President had to say. Glancing over at Alice, I could see she was

on the edge of her seat to know the answer to the reporter's question as well.

The president paused for a moment; he didn't seem to have an answer prepared for that question. Honestly, I didn't see any way that he could prove that we weren't a threat besides our words and actions. Though, since we hadn't started tearing apart the country, or tried to enslave the human race, I thought we were doing a pretty bang up job keeping our word.

The reporters didn't seem to think so, because the moment he paused, they began to shout questions at him. The president began to lose his cool and collected poker face.

"Well, I...um..." the president stumbled over his words and looked off to the side again, an expression of panic covering his face.

All of the reporters turned as well as did the camera to the person he was looking at.

The moment I saw that blonde head of hair and that familiar cocky smile, I jumped to my feet. "What the fuck!"

Dressed in a stylish, black business suit stood Gab. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a sophisticated twist, and she had a smile that would have melted even my panties had I been anywhere near her. The way the reporters' faces began to have a dreamy haze left no doubt that she was spewing a heavy amount of pheromones.

"That's illegal," Alice commented from my side.

"No shit." I snorted. "What the hell is she even doing there?"

"Shh. She's about to say something." Alice waved a hand at me and we turned back to the television.

"Hello," Gab addressed the crowd of adoring humans. "My name is Erydesa of the Seelie Court." She paused for a moment, her eyes sweeping the area. "My fellow Fae and I have been driven from our home and have sought shelter here in your world. The humans have always been kind to our people, and it is unfair of us to burden you so, but we desperately beg you to tolerate our existence in your world for a little while longer." Gab sniffled and then pulled a tissue from somewhere, dabbing her eyes, though I was sure there wasn't a tear in sight. "Once the threat to our world is gone, we will return as if we were never here in the first place. Thank you."

Gab stepped back from the podium as the reporters rushed her with questions. The security guards ushered her off the stage, and the president ended the conference.

Clicking the television off, I turned to Alice to ask her what she thought of this whole thing, but a voice from the hallway cut me off.

“Hello? Is this thing on?”



Chapter 4

A Helping Hand

ALICE AND I glanced at each other. Shrugging her shoulders, she continued to pat her eyes dry, seeming to have no intention of getting up to see who it was.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get it.” I rolled my eyes at her while getting up from the couch and making my way to the hallway.

Like most things in my grandmother’s house, the hallway wasn’t very big, but she had jam packed it with as many family pictures as she could fit on the tiny wall. In the center of the wall, surrounded by my sister’s and mine school pictures, and some of my mother’s wedding photos, was an old antique mirror.

The mirror was one of the first ones I had covered when I came back from the Underground. Square and about three feet tall, it had a brass frame in an ugly dark beige color. The mirror had always given me the creeps, even before I knew they could be used to travel between worlds.

“I don’t think they can hear me, Pat.” The voice said behind the sheet covering the surface. “Are you sure this is her house and I’m not in some basement?”

A cough like wheeze was followed by an irritated growl, “Of course, I’m sure! Don’t you think I know my own devices? A millennia of creating mirror portals and this is the thanks I get?”

“Now, Pat, you know that’s not what I meant.” The voice changed to a soothing tone that I registered in my mind well. My Fae father had used that voice on my mother so many times I had lost count. Hearing it now had my hand reaching out to pull the sheet off the mirror to reveal his handsome, but strained face.

“Father?” I watched him with a growing curiosity. “What are you doing here?”

In the mirror stood the Seelie King. His blond hair was cut short and fell over his face, where worry lines marred his otherwise young and youthful face. Fae might not age quickly, but stress could kill them just as

fast as any iron, and I could imagine the king was under a lot of stress lately.

“See. I told you I knew what I was doing.” The other voice grouched at him, pulling his attention back to the mirror.

Startled, he jumped back, his dark brown eyes widening. “Ly—I mean Lady, or do you prefer Kat? I’m not quite sure what I’m supposed to call you.” He gave me a sheepish grin and scratched the back of his head. The cream colored tunic he was wearing shifted, allowing a scar I hadn’t seen before to be visible along his wrist.

I wanted to ask about it but thought better of it and smiled instead. “Kat’s fine.” My brow furrowed having thought of something. “What do you want me to call you? I mean, technically you are not my father. Do you have a preference?”

“Oh, uh.” He fumbled for a bit, his face turning a slight pink color. “Whatever makes you comfortable, I suppose? You can call me father or you could call me king or your majesty...” he stopped and chuckled. “It is all kind of silly, isn’t it? This whole no name rule.”

I had to smile. I had almost forgotten what a goof ball my father was, nothing like my mother. I always wondered how they ever got together in the first place.

“I apologize, I don’t usually use these confounded things. I’m a bit out of my depth I’m afraid.” He gave a nervous laugh and glanced over at something off to the side. I could only assume it was the mysterious Pat who had been speaking earlier.

“That’s all right,” I assured him kind of awkwardly myself. “So, what brings you to my humble hallway?” I gestured around me laughing at my own stupid joke.

“Well, first off.” He stood up straighter, his eyes surveying me as if he hadn’t seen me in years. “I wanted to see how you were doing. I know we didn’t really get a chance to talk the last couple of times you came to court. Though, some of that couldn’t be helped.”

The first time I had come to court as a human, I had no idea who he was, and was more focused on finding Hatter than getting cozy with the royals. Not to forget, I was drunk on faerie wine at the time too. The second time hadn’t been any better.

When your mind is full of revenge, all thoughts of getting reacquainted with relatives are pushed to the back of your mind. All I could think about

then was punishing my mother for what she did to Chess and making sure it didn't happen again. Finding out what her true intentions were was just an added benefit.

Shifting my weight from one foot to the other, I let sarcasm seep into my words. "Yeah, it's kind of hard to get reacquainted when you are fighting for your life."

"Fighting for your life?" he shook his head, confusion etching his face. "There was no such threat. No, your mother may be high strung and stubborn—"

Pat snorted off to the side. "That's an understatement."

"—as they come." he frowned. "But there was no way she would have ever hurt you."

I pursed my lips and stared at him hard. Not hurt me? Did hair pulling and siccing the guards on me not count? Maybe his definition of what counted as bodily harm had changed since I became human.

"I mean, not really," he stumbled over his words at my glare. After a moment he sighed. "You have to understand, Kat, your mother is under a lot of pressure. When you...passed, it was hard on all of us, not just the prince."

"So you thought it fit to punish him before you got all the facts and locked down the Underground? Yeah, that makes a lot of sense." I scoffed, my eyes looking off to the side as I crossed my arms over my chest. Should I be defending someone who was now friends with the bad guy?

"Now, you can't blame that all on her. You know we were all tricked, and what was she supposed to do when it looked like the man you were promised to caused your death because of his dalliances? Any parent or ruler would have done the same." He said the words, but his eyes told me he did blame her, at least to a certain degree.

When I had gone to the tree after I saw Dorian kissing Alice, the rest of the world hadn't known that it was all a trick, or that it hadn't really been his fault. Even I hadn't known what was really going on at the time. We were all just pawns in a game we didn't know the rules to. A game I was getting tired of playing.

"Anyways," I said, changing the subject from what was soon to be a full blown argument. "I'm sure you didn't come here to lecture me, so what do you want?"

"Ha! She's your daughter all right." Pat gaffed from out of sight, not being able to see the person who was talking was becoming really

annoying.

“Would you be quiet?” my father growled, the first hint of irritation showing on his face, his head jerked to the side as he chastised the voice.

“Well, excuse me for breathing. Let me remind you, that you are in my home, not the other way around, your majesty.” Pat, who was becoming more definitively male, snarled before the sound of footsteps stomped away.

“Who’s Pat?” I couldn’t hold back the question anymore. I couldn’t remember ever meeting someone named Pat, certainly not someone who would talk to the Seelie King with such disrespect and get away with it.

“Oh, him?” he pointed a thumb toward the general direction Pat’s voice had come from. “Just an old friend of the family, nothing to worry about. He’s just a grumpy old man who needs to find more hobbies than fiddling with these silly mirrors.”

“All right,” I drew out accepting his answer, but not quite believing that was all there was to it.

“So, the reason I was calling is that I believe that it is high time I put my foot down.” He puffed his chest out, and his arms shifted like he had placed his hands on his hips. “Your mother has gone too far, taking your boy and all.” He shook his head and sighed. “We are in dark times, and you need all the help you can get. Taking Cheshire was just petty of her.”

My heart lifted at the mention of Chess, and then crashed when I remembered where he was currently residing. Even though we had a falling out, I couldn’t help but care if he was all right. I needed to know, not just to ease the guilt in my heart, but because a silly part of me still thought we might have a chance.

“Are you going to have him released, then?” My voice was hopeful and thankfully only had a bit of desperation in it.

He shook his head, his blond hair swaying slightly. “No, no. I can’t do that. I don’t have that kind of power, but you do.” He pointed a finger at the mirror. “If anyone can release Cheshire from the bowels of the Bandersnatch it would be you.”

“But how can I? I’m in the human world, remember?” I gestured to the room around me. “It’s not like I can easily get back over there. The portal to your world is closed to me, and I wouldn’t begin to know how to make a mirror active that wasn’t already that way before. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

The mirror in my room was completely smashed from when my Fae mother kidnapped Chess. I had gone to every thrift store I could find, looking for a full-length mirror that I could use to get back to the Underground, but no matter how much I tried, I could never get the mirror to activate. There had to be some kind of trick to make it a portal between worlds, I just wished I knew how.

“Ah.” He held up a finger and then gestured off to the side to someone. “That is why I’m here.”

A short man, with a head full of wild, peppered hair, stepped up and into the frame. His even larger ears only offset his large nose. He wore a set of goggles that he pulled down off his forehead to set over his eyes, and he squinted to get a good look at me.

“Pat here’s talent is creating portals, he can make a portal out of anything with a reflective surface. He set up all of the mirrors in our world and made it possible for you and Chess to use them.” My father stood behind Pat letting him take up most of the mirror.

“Nice to meet you.” I smiled at him, he kind of reminded me of Mop in a way. Though, Mop had a thick accent and was a brownie, he and Pat seemed to be kindred spirits when it came to being just down right grumpy.

“Nice? Not really.” Pat grimaced and nodded. “But it’ll do.”

“What will do?”

“The mirror of course. I haven’t created a portal this small in a while, but I believe I still have what it takes to pull it off. Now, stand back and let me do my work.” He cracked his knuckles and shook his shoulders as if ramping himself up to do something big.

“Wait! Now? You want me to come through now?” Panic filled my chest and my eyes searched around me as if there was something there that could help me.

“Of course, silly girl. Why else do you think we are here?” Pat rolled his eyes and looked behind him. “I thought you told me she was brave?”

“She is.” My father pressed his lips together in a frown, and then an apologetic smile crossed his face as he glanced back to me. “I’m sorry this is such short notice, but really, the sooner you are over here the better. Time is really of the essence, and we can’t wait for the Shadows to make their next move. Plus now is the best time, your mother is off visiting the UnSeelie Court, comforting the queen over her loss.”

My heart clenched at the thought. Poor Mab, she lost her son because of me, and when she just got him back, lost him *again*, because of me. I wouldn't be surprised if that woman hated my guts. I certainly deserved it.

"Fine. I get your point," I cut him off and held a finger up. "Just hold on a second." I darted out of the hallway and into the living room where Alice sat munching away in front of the television. "Hey, Alice."

She glanced up from the TV, her hand pausing mid-bite. "Who was that?"

"My father has found us a way back into the Underground, but we have to get going now if we want to save Chess, and get out before my mother gets back from the UnSeelie Court." My hands moved in rapid flourish as I tried to get everything out in one breath. Taking a deep breath, I waved her over. "Are you coming?"

"No, I don't think so." She shook her head with a definitive movement. "There are plenty of Fae who need me here. I can't just take off whenever I feel like it."

Alice was starting to make me look bad. I was supposed to be the savior, and here I was only thinking about myself and getting Chess out. I hadn't even thought about the other Fae here in the human realm.

While I saw her point, I really didn't want to go alone. Plus, if I had any chance of getting Chess out, it would be with her help. She knew about the Bandersnatch more than I did.

"But what about Hatter? Don't you want to see him again? I'm sure he would be happy to see you, especially now with Hare and them gone." I watched her to see if she would take the bait. One thing I had learned from my time with Alice and the Fae was if they didn't want to do what you wanted the first time around, make it all about them, then they were more than happy to pretend like it was their idea in the first place.

She seemed to think about it for a moment, and then without a word, rolled the bag of chips up, set them on the coffee table, and stood from the couch. Her sensible heels clicked on the floor as she walked across the room. Before she reached me, though, her dress pants and blouse were transformed into the blue and white dress I had first met her in, except less moth-eaten and stained.

"What?" she asked when I arched a brow at her. "I can't very well see Hatter dressed like that, he wouldn't even know how to react."

“I didn’t say anything.” I held my hands up and fought the smile that threatened to creep up my face. There was definitely something going on between those two, and I was bound and determined to figure it out before we left the Underground.

“Are you about finished?” Pat’s voice called out from the hall. “We haven’t got all day.”

“We’re coming, hold your horses.” Coming around the corner, I stopped in front of the mirror once more, this time with Alice by my side. “We’re here. Now what.”

Pat’s nose stuck up in the air as he looked down at us. “While you were dilly dallying, I already set up your mirror here to act as a portal from your house to my workshop.”

“And where is that?” I craned my neck trying to see around the edges of the frame but could only see a few sets of shelves around my father and Pat’s forms.

“In Summerville, of course, silly girl.” He fiddled with some gadget with several gears and levers, only half paying us any mind. What kind of Fae was he? He couldn’t be a Higher Fae; he wasn’t tall enough or attractive enough. Most Lower Fae tended to be animals, or like in Mop’s case, a brownie. I was about to ask, but Alice jumped in before I could.

“But Summerville is all the way on the other side of the Seelie Court,” Alice whined, stomping her foot against the wooden floor. “How are we going to get to Cheshire in time?”

“Well, if you want to be that way.” Pat reached up to the mirror his hand beginning to glow. “I can just take back my portal and you can just—”

“No!” Alice and I cried out in unison.

“I mean, no.” I cleared my throat and glared at Alice. “Thank you. Summerville will be fine.”

“That’s what I thought.” Pat sniffed, the glow on his hand dimming as he lowered it back down.

“All right, so...” I trailed off eyeing the mirror. “It would be difficult to just walk through it, but we could probably crawl through it on all fours or something. What do you think, Alice?”

“I’m not getting my clothes dirty.” She crinkled her nose. “I know how often you clean these floors.”

“Well, if someone else would help me with the chores they’d get done more often,” I said between clenched teeth.

I swore if there was a list of the worst roommates ever, Alice would be number one, or at least in the top five. She didn't do chores. She didn't pick up after herself. I found chips all over the couch and floor every other day, and I was lucky my mom had given me money, or I'd have been eaten out of house and home within the next few days. With her figure, it was a wonder where it all went to, even Fae had to worry about getting fat, didn't they?

"You two are worse than a pair of rabid dogs. Just put the mirror on the floor." Pat waved his hand at it, impatience littering his voice. "Then you can just step into it."

Alice and I looked at each other and shrugged. I grabbed the mirror off the wall and carefully placed it on the floor. Sliding my hand along the edges to activate it, I stood up as I waited for the surface to ripple.

Standing by the frame, I gestured to Alice. "After you."

She took a step backward, a wary frown on her face. "It's your portal, you go."

"Fine." Taking a deep aggravated breath, I stepped into the swirling liquid. "Here we go again."



Chapter 5

Portals And Gadgets

IT WAS WEIRD going through the mirror feet first. Instead of being fully engulfed in the cool liquid, it was a slow climb that started at my toes and crawled up my legs, like I was sinking into quicksand.

When I came out the other side, I ended up on a dusty floor in a heap of junk. My back ached and hands burned from being jabbed by random bits of metal. I turned around just in time to see Alice's feet coming for my head. I jumped to the side, so as not to get turned into a Kat pancake but fell into another pile of junk.

Really?

"Uck!" Alice lifted her arms, her nose crinkled up at the dirt coating her skin. "Don't you ever clean in here?" She shifted around in the pile, pulling out a corkscrew-like mechanism from behind her back.

"Who has the time?" Both our heads turned to look at Pat.

In person, Pat was even smaller than he was in the mirror. He barely reached my father's waist, and my dad was more than a foot taller than me. Pat wore a pair of overalls that had different tools hanging on a belt wrapped around his waist and random parts stuck out of every pocket. He had his goggles up on his forehead once more as he eyed us on the floor.

The Seelie King stood beside Pat, his hand behind his back looking as regal as any King could standing in the middle of a mountain of junk. His cream shirt fell over his muscular frame and landed just below the top of his matching pants that covered his plain shoes. Unlike the rest of the Underground, who was bound and determined to look obscene and sexual, his was more professional and inviting. Which I was thankful for honestly. If I had come in to see him in one of Chess', or God forbid one of Jewels' outfits, I would have needed some extensive therapy.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Pat gestured at us, breaking my train of thought. "I didn't bring you here to take a nap on my floor. I have work to do, and so do you."

Easing up from the ground, my eyes scanned the room. Just like its owner, it was filled with different tools and gadgets. And mirrors. There

were mirrors on every surface and wall, of every shape and size, some of them even without frames.

“So, you make all the portals in the Underground?” I stared in awe at the amount of mirrors surrounding us. “How?”

“What do you mean how?” he said it like it was the worst question I could have possibly asked. “How does anything magical work?”

Was that a rhetorical question?

“It just does.” I shrugged, answering anyways.

“Exactly. So don’t ask questions you already know the answer to.” He sniffed and turned his back on us, going to a workstation to fiddle with a mirror he had separated into pieces.

“Speaking of glamours.” My father stepped in. “You and...” he glanced to Alice and frowned. “I’m sorry. I don’t think we have met.”

“We have actually, but it was a long time ago, I’m not surprised you don’t remember.” Alice gave him a small curtsy; smiling at him with so much delight it was almost scary. “I’m Alice. Alice Liddell. Your wife had me imprisoned for your daughter’s death.”

“Oh my, that was you?” Horror covered his face, and he took a step back in surprise. It would have been funny had we not already been in a hurry. We didn’t really have time to be rehashing old problems.

“Is that really important right now?” I stepped up between them, breaking the weird tension that had begun to fill the room. “Shouldn’t we be going?”

“Yes, yes. You are quite right.” He nodded, giving Alice one more cursory look before he turned to Pat. “Did you give them that thing?”

“Thing?” Pat’s brow bunched together, and then he held a finger up and recognition filling his eyes. “Ah hah. That!” he went over to one of his shelves and dug around in a drawer.

The shelf he was searching was one of many shelves in the room. There was a multitude of them lining the walls where there weren’t mirrors, each with some kind of gadget or a drawer full of items. Piles of glass from what could have been mirrors waiting to be put together sat on some of the shelves, and I couldn’t help but wonder how much bad luck he had acquired over his years. He had to have smashed a few of them by now since he left them lying around like that.

After a moment or so, he turned back to us, blowing the dust off the surface of what looked like a small metal compact. “Here we are.”

“What is it?” I took the item from him and turned it over in my hand before clicking the small metal latch, opening it up to reveal a mirror inside.

“It’s a mirror, silly girl.” He growled, shaking his head and muttering to himself.

“I can see that,” I snapped back, closing the top of the compact with a click. “Why are you giving it to me? I can’t exactly fit through the surface of it.” The mirror was barely bigger than the palm of my hand, and I’d be lucky if I could fit a faerie through the frame let alone a grown person.

“I wouldn’t expect you to. It’s for communication, not transportation.” He rolled his eyes like I should have known that as he moved across the room.

“So, then, how do I make it work?” I tapped my foot getting impatient with the way he was talking to me. If I wanted someone to talk down to me I could have stayed home with my human mother.

“Just like anything else in the Underground. You use your magic,” my father spoke up, drawing our attention away from the grumpy Fae and to him. “This mirror will allow you to communicate to any mirror that has been activated as a portal.”

“Really?” Alice asked, stepping close to me so she could see the compact in my hand. “Even between worlds?”

“Wouldn’t be much good if it didn’t now, would it?” Pat snorted from his place by one of the walls where he was messing with some of the mirrors on a shelf.

I stared down at the metal in my hand. Being able to speak between worlds could be handy, especially now that so many Fae were in the human world. I had better make sure to keep it close.

“You can use that to call here *if* you get into trouble. I can create a portal so you can get back here in a snap.” Pat snapped his fingers and then narrowed his gaze. “But only *if* you are in trouble. Not because you are missing home or need something else petty like that. My powers aren’t parlor tricks for your amusement. Though, some seem to forget that.” His eyes slid to the king, accusation clear in his eyes.

“As I was saying before.” My father stepped forward, ignoring Pat’s glare. “You might want to think about using a glamour. Alice might cause a couple of curious glances but you,” he pointed at my jeans and t-shirt, “You do nothing but scream human world. Plus, your mother has everyone on

high alert looking for you. A full glamour wouldn't be a bad idea about now."

Pursing my lips, I looked at myself in one of the many mirrors around Pat's shop. I did kind of stick out. I thought about it for a moment, and then a slow smile crept up my face. I knew just what to do!

As my magic swept over me, my hair shortened into a fashionable bob, the color changing from white blonde to a light strawberry. The glamour on my eyes switched from green to a robin's egg blue and a sprinkle of freckles scattered across a newly elongated nose.

I slid my hands down my sides, taking in the dark brown leather pants that were tucked into knee high boots. The waist of the pants had a crisscross tie that was just barely hidden beneath the edge of my avocado colored spaghetti strap top that hung nicely over my A cup chest.

"Very nice indeed." Pat nodded in appreciation, his eyes scanning up and down my figure with a weird look that made me uncomfortable.

The look I had gone for was one I'd seen a friend from college use back in New York. The outfit was actually something Lydia had worn one night when we went to a frat party. I had always envied her small chest, and now I had the chance to try it out. Not needing a bra was a fucking fantastic relief!

"You're not one for being subtle are you?" Alice wrinkled her nose at me, her displeasure at my choice of outfit not even remotely hidden.

"If I'm going to pretend to be someone else I might as well go all out." I shrugged, an unapologetic smile on my face. "Now it's your turn. While I like the dress, there's no way anyone will believe you are just hanging out in the Seelie Court for no reason."

Frowning, Alice viewed her image in the mirror. Even though, I had just changed my own face I was still filled with awe when her hair flickered to a deep brown and her eyes became a darker shade that enveloped her pupil until it was practically nonexistent. Her cheekbones arched up higher on her face, and her lips changed from bow shaped, so top one was a bit fuller than the bottom.

Finally, her blue tea dress was morphed into a knee length, blood red sheath dress, and her black Mary Jane's were replaced with a low-heeled, strappy sandal. All in all, she looked good.

"Geez, Alice. Who did you use as your inspiration?" I cocked my head to the side, looking her over. She didn't look like anyone I had ever seen

before, but the clothing was too close to that of something I had seen in the human world for her to have come up with it on her own.

“There was this woman on the television, who wore a dress like this. I have wanted to try it ever since.” Her hands smoothed down the sides of the dress. She turned this way and that. She had a satisfied smile on her face as she admired her handy work.

“Well, good choice.” I gave her a thumbs up, earning me a curious look in return. Turning back to Pat, I tossed the mirror back and forth between my hands. “So what now?”

“Be careful with that!” Pat jerked the mirror from my hands. “These things are fragile, you know.”

“Sorry,” I muttered while rubbing the back of my neck with a shrug.

Pat’s furry eyebrows came together in the middle of his forehead, making them look like one big, long, caterpillar. I placed a hand over my mouth to keep from laughing as he berated me on the importance of taking care of things that didn’t belong to me. Really, how could anyone keep a straight face with those eyebrows wiggling around like that?

“Are you listening, girl?”

I dropped my hand, swallowing a smile as I nodded at him. “Yes, I understand. I’ll be more careful with it.”

“You better be.” He shoved the mirror back into my hands and then turned toward the front of the shop. “Now get out of my shop. I have things to do.” He opened a door that chimed as it hit an old fashioned kind of bell hanging from the top of the frame.

“Wait.” Alice stopped us before we could take a step. “Where are we going?”

I was glad Alice had asked, because my head was so out of sorts I would have walked right out the door without a clue of where to go next. At Alice’s question, though, my father seemed a bit reluctant to answer. He shuffled his feet and looked around the room.

“Well, you see...” he trailed off scratching the back of his head, a gesture we seemed to have in common when we were nervous. “There’s only a few ways into the palace that would get you in undetected.”

“Then why can’t we just use a mirror?” I directed my question toward Pat. He still had the door open and waiting for us with an impatient frown.

“You could do that,” Pat started. “If you want to land right in the lap of the court guards.”

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I waited for my father to continue. If he didn't want to tell us where we were going, it probably wasn't anywhere I wanted to be. Not that I would know since the most I'd seen of the Seelie Court was the same as when I was the princess.

"Well?" I prompted him to continue. "Where are we going?"

He gave an unenthusiastic sigh before beginning, "You know your mother is being quite difficult as of late, and so she has tripled the guards as well as put the whole palace on high alert for the Shadows and you."

"Me?" I pointed at myself. I knew that people would be looking for me, but I had thought it was more because they wanted my help than because my mother was being a right bitch.

By the door, Pat gave a morbidly delighted chuckle. "Your little performance with the guards the last time has spread all over the court. It is making the people question the queen's ability to rule. If she can't even keep her own daughter in check, how is she going to keep us safe from the Shadows? It's no wonder she should have stepped down ages ago—"

"As I was saying," the king cut in, glowering at Pat. "You won't be able to just walk into the palace this time. You'll have to go through one of the lesser known entrances. That's why we brought you here, to Summerville. There is an entrance into the palace not far from here on Juba Drive that comes out into our library."

Our library he said it like it was still mine and his.

When I lived in the palace, the library was my one sanctuary that I could go to get away from my overbearing mother and the palace gossip. Father would frequently meet with me there. We'd spend hours there reading anything from the history of the Underground to mythical tales of heroes and heroines fighting evil and falling in love. It was one of our things, and the only time I felt like I was actually truly loved by at least one of my parents.

It was funny how I still loved the library in my human life. I guess some things never changed.

"So, we get to the library and then what?" I asked. "We just waltz into your bedroom? Won't we get caught?"

"No, once you get to the library you can take the mirror in there to the Memory room. That will at least get you half way. After that, you are on your own. I suggest keeping your glamour on until you make it to the room." He pulled out something from his pocket and handed it to me. "And

this belongs to you I believe, it opens more than just the door to the Underground. It might come in handy.”

It was a key. The one I had lost when I passed out at the glowing tree. But where did he get it?

“I found it,” he answered my unasked question. “At the base of the tree you were found at. I had always liked that tree, and used to visit it from time to time before...” he trailed off his eyes going sad, and then just as quickly, his face smoothed over replaced with a small hopeful grin. “Well, that was before. Now it’s a reminder that what is lost can always come back to you when you least expect it.”

The smile he gave me made me feel like a little girl again, and all I wanted to do was be enfolded into his arms. Both the human and Fae part of me were daddy’s girls and it seemed we both missed them.

Placing the pink ribbon around my neck and tucking the key into my shirt, I followed Alice to the door. I paused and turned back to my father who hadn’t followed us.

“You aren’t coming?” I frowned, disappointment filled my voice.

Guilt covered his face, but he didn’t step forward to comfort me. “As much as I’d love to help you, dear. Your mother would have my head if she knew I helped you. King or not.”

“I understand.” I knew a little too well. He might have said before that she didn’t have any intentions of hurting me, but I could tell we both knew that wasn’t entirely true. If it suited her she could hurt just about anyone who got in her way.

“If you need anything just call on that mirror. Really anything at all. Don’t worry about Pat. I’ll take care of him.” He stared hard at the older Fae, daring him to contradict him.

“Bah.” Pat waved a hand at him and left the door, leaving me to catch it before it closed.

I stood in the doorway half in and half out of the shop, just taking him in. The thought of leaving him there didn’t sit well with me. I couldn’t help but feel like if I walked out this door I would never see him again. A burning sensation pricked at my eyes, and I forced myself to look away.

“Well, I guess I’ll be going now,” I said lamely, clearing my throat of the thick lump that had formed there. “Um, bye.”

“Good-bye. Lynne.” His words resonated with me as the door closed behind me.



Chapter 6

Juba drive

STANDING OUT IN front of the shop, the anxious feeling I had was briefly forgotten at the sight before me. Unlike the UnSeelie Court that was all gray stone, Summerville had a deep, rich, brown-red brick stone that lined the ground like a road. Pat's shop was made of the same stone, but more worn. The shop had gears sticking out of the walls, as if the wall had grown around them. A sign hung from the roof, and in sharp mechanical writing said: Pat's Portals and Gadgets.

The rest of the buildings were similar to Pat's. They seemed more like they had sprouted out of the red stone than to have been built. Each one of them was covered with their own unique style.

One that could have been a clothing store had huge scissors jutting out through the middle of the building. Another one had to be a coffee shop. While the building was made of the red brick, it was shaped like a cup with a handle, and I could have sworn there was steam coming from the top of it.

Did Fae even drink coffee? I'd never had it when I lived in the palace, never even heard of it. But then again, I wasn't allowed Faerie wine either, not until Dorian snuck me some one time. Thinking about that night made my face heat. It hadn't just been the first time I'd had wine, but also the first time we had kissed. Thinking about it now made me sad to know how much we had fallen apart. Where was he?

"What are you waiting for?" Alice jabbed me in the side, jerking me out of my thoughts. "It's not like you haven't been here before."

"I haven't."

"How is that even possible?" she flipped her brown hair over her shoulder and put her hands on her hips, looking very much the diva she was portraying. Alice made the skin she was wearing look natural and not at all like she was afraid her magic would slip at any moment. Not like me.

"I never left the palace before now." Shrugging, I moved away from Pat's shop and started down the road in the direction my father had instructed. I kept my eyes forward and tried to become invisible, even though the few Fae on the street were staring at us hardcore.

What are you looking at? Just some normal Fae walking down the street, nothing to see here!

“Well, that is complete rubbish.” Alice scoffed catching up to me, not seeming to care that the locals were eyeballing us. “What is the point of being a princess, if you are confined to one place?”

“The kind whose mother was overprotective.” I glanced around looking for the sign that would point us in the right direction. There were so many signs jutting out of walls and floors, each street name more unusual than the last. Cheaters Street. Wrong Way Lane. Liars Be Here Avenue. Were they trying to warn someone with these signs, or did someone just have a messed up sense of humor?

“Are you sure the queen was being overprotective and not just a nasty witch?”

A few Fae stopped to stare at us. I gave them a nervous smile and grabbed Alice by the arm and dragged her into the nearest alleyway.

“You probably shouldn’t talk bad about her in her own court. You’ll draw the wrong kind of attention.” I kept my eyes on the entry to the alley, watching for anyone who would have followed us. No one did but several dared to sneak a peek in our direction as they passed by.

“Pfft. Like I care what any of these ninnies think. It’s not like she can do anything to me anymore. The Shadow man is out and about now, there’s nothing in the Hall of Mirrors to be afraid of.” I slapped a hand over her mouth as her words got louder and louder.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I growled, hiding her with my body so that the onlookers couldn’t see what I was saying.

Alice kept talking against my hand, trying to be heard over the muffling of my hand. In her glamoured form, she was almost a head taller than me, making it awkward with my hand so high above my head. When I didn’t remove my hand, she jerked her arm out of mine and pointed at something behind me.

Turning around, my gaze trailed up to the sign she was pointing at. ‘Loudmouth Alley.’ I read. “Well, that explains it,” I said to myself. “But why didn’t it affect me?”

Alice gave me a ‘you got to be kidding me’ face. I didn’t blame her. The question was pretty stupid. Nothing had affected me the same as the rest of the Fae, why should the magic on the streets be any different?

Grabbing her hand, I replaced mine with her own. “Keep that there until we get out of here, all right? We don’t need any more attention drawn to us.”

She nodded her hand firmly over her mouth and wrapped the other one around her waist as if to help keep quiet.

When we stepped out of the alley, most of the onlookers had gotten bored and had gone back to their business. Lucky for us, we weren’t interesting enough to cause much of an alarm. I led the way back onto the street and resumed my search for Juba Drive. It was the only street name that wasn’t named after something weird, not that Juba was in anyway normal.

After a moment or two of searching, I was jerked back by Alice’s hand on my elbow. I turned to ask what the problem was when she pointed down a narrow path between two buildings. There was nothing lighting up the pathway, the walls surrounding it were broken down and neglected. At the entrance to the alley was a half-legible sign with its name handwritten in red paint.

Juba Drive.

“This must be it.” I checked down each side of the street making sure no one was paying us any mind. I wouldn’t want to get caught now after we made it this far. When I was sure no one was going to follow us, I gestured to Alice, and we made our way down the dark pathway.

“It’s so dark,” I stated after a few moments of walking with no light in the distance. It was just a bunch of pitch-dark nothingness. I reached my hands out in front of me to search for anything that could try to jump out at us.

When my hands touched a solid, rough surface that I assumed was a wall, I let my hand trail along it as a guide into the dark. We walked for a good five minutes or so with nothing but the wall as our hint to where we were going.

Alice tugged on the back of my shirt.

“You could use magic you know,” Alice whispered next to me. Why she was whispering I didn’t know, but it seemed like a good idea considering we didn’t know if we were actually alone.

“Magic? I do plant life not balls of light,” I reminded her. My footsteps became slower as I realized I could fall off a cliff and not even know it. What did she think I was some anime character that could shoot magic out

of my hands at will? I was lucky I could do the things I could. Pushing it didn't seem like a good idea.

"When has that ever stopped you before?" she placed a hand on my shoulder stopping me in place.

She had a point. No matter the challenge, I always seemed to be able to do more than I should be able to. Why shouldn't I be able to conjure light out of thin air?

Turning around to where I thought we came before, I noticed the entrance was completely gone. We were in complete darkness now with no way to get back. There really wasn't a choice anymore. It was go forward and blindly hope we found our way or try to create a miracle.

"Here goes nothing," I mumbled, placing my hands in front of me. How the heck was I supposed to make light? Should I say some kind of magic word? Or was it as simple as my glamour and just thinking about it would make it happen?

"What are you doing?" Alice asked next to me, her hand still on my shirt, I assumed so as not to lose me, but I was happy to know I wasn't alone in here.

"Trying to make light, duh." I rolled my eyes, though I knew she couldn't see me.

"Oh, well, do you think you could hurry it up?" her voice was impatient and filled with just a hint of fear. Could good ole Alice be afraid of the dark? With what lived in here I wouldn't be surprised. I was afraid too.

"Do you want to do it?" I dropped my hands and glared in the direction Alice's voice came from. When she didn't answer, I put my hands back up. "That's what I thought."

I stared hard at where my hands were in the dark and thought for a moment this was silly. I couldn't make light appear out of thin air. It wasn't as easy as a snap of my fingers. Or was it?

Praying to whatever deity was listening, I placed my forefinger and middle finger together and snapped. The sound reverberated through the area, echoing off the walls we couldn't see and further into the distance. The sound settled and where my fingers were pressed together, a small ball of light emerged.

"You did it!" Alice jumped up and down in the dim light.

“I guess I did.” I smiled at my accomplishment. Who said I couldn’t make things out of thin air? Certainly, not this girl.

The light wasn’t big, about the size of a regular light bulb, but it was enough to see a few feet around us, showing that we were no longer surrounded by red brick walls. In their place were dirt walls that curved overhead to create a cave like area. The ground was littered with rocks and debris; I wondered why I hadn’t fallen flat on my face yet.

My victory was short-lived, though, because shortly after the light filled the cave, a scratching noise came from further in. Alice and I spun toward the sound. My little ball of light followed my gaze.

“What was that?” I squinted into the dark, trying to see further than the few feet the light provided.

Alice stepped next to me, her hand coming up to her face as she also tried to see what the noise was. “Should we investigate?”

Wasn’t that the beginning of every horror film ever created? A noise in the dark, that for some unknown reason, the main characters decide it is a great idea to go find out what it is, usually, without a flashlight or any kind of protection.

But we weren’t like those idiots. We weren’t defenseless, and we weren’t without a light. I didn’t know if I could maintain the light and fight, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to die in this cave. There were people depending on me. Chess was depending on me. Hell, I was depending on me!

“Oh my Lord,” Alice stuttered, “It’s...it’s the JubJub!” Alice pointed at the shadow that had stepped close to the edge of my magically induced light.

“The what?”

Large talons clacked against the stone floor as a bird like creature stalked toward us. Its wings expanded out four feet in both directions, while its sharp beak snapped at us. Its bloodshot eyes bulged from its head, where its skeletal-like frame was covered with feathers that looked like they had been glued on rather than grown.

Alice grabbed me by the shoulders, giving me a little shake. “What the hell are you waiting for? Run!”

She didn’t have to tell me twice. Turning on my heel, my feet pounded on the ground beneath us, each step causing a crunching noise. The little

ball of light led the way, giving us just enough light not to trip over ourselves.

The JubJub chased after us. Its claws and wings scraped the ground and walls around us, causing the cave to shake and dirt to fall onto us. I kept my hands over my head, so as not to have an unexpected concussion, but my foot caught on a stone. I was thrown to the floor. A roar cried out behind me, and as I turned to look back, the ball of light followed my line of sight lighting up the cave behind us.

Gleaming red eyes bore into me, and for a moment, I was trapped. I couldn't think, couldn't speak. All I could do was listen to the rampaging beat of my heart as the JubJub came closer and closer...

"Ouch!" I jerked my eyes from the monstrous bird to glower at Alice who had stepped on my hand with one of her low-heeled boots.

"Don't look it in the eyes, you idiot!" her voice was a nasty snarl that I had never heard before.

Scrambling to my feet, I kept my eyes firmly planted in front of me and ignored the prickly feeling on the back of my neck telling me to look back. It wasn't just the Higher Fae who could ensnare humans, I couldn't imagine what kind of horrors it could wreak if it got into the human world. It made it that much more important for me to live so I'd never have to find out.

"Come on, this way." Alice tugged on my hand, leading me down a corridor that we hadn't been able to see before on the first time through.

As we made our way around the corner, the JubJub's steps became faster and more aggressive. It cried out as it bashed around the corner trying to get to us. The corridor was smaller than the other one, and I doubted the bird would be able to fit its whole body through the entrance with much ease.

Taking a chance, I peeked behind me to find the bird had indeed gotten stuck at the entrance, its wings too big to fit through. It clawed at the walls around it and tried to squeeze through. It cawed, a sound that made my blood run cold, and I had to force my feet to keep moving. Luckily, after a moment, it decided we weren't worth the trouble. It snarled at us and turned back the way it came. Or went to find another way.

An outcry from Alice had my vision jerking away from the JubJub and back to her, only I found myself alone. I searched the area but couldn't see her anywhere. We were still in the cave and the walls didn't really give any

options for hiding. As I searched for her, I became more and more frustrated when there was just more and more wall in front, below, and above me.

“Alice? Where are you?” I took a step forward. My next words turned into a scream as the floor came out from under me.



Chapter 7

Tick Tock

THE FALL SEEMED to go on forever. After the first five minutes I quit screaming. The hole was so big that I wasn't able to see the sides outside of my little ball of light that fought to keep up with my descent. I couldn't hear Alice's screams, meaning she had probably given up after a few minutes as well. Or she was dead.

I tried to not think about the last bit as I continued to fall further and further into the dark pit. My mind wandered to those who would miss me when I was gone. The amount of people on the list was kind of depressing.

The only one who would probably even care if I was gone were my human and Fae fathers. My sister might shed a tear or two but would get over it lieu of a new project. My human mother would do everything she was supposed to. Cry, wear black, and donate a huge amount to a charity under my name. But miss me? I wasn't so sure.

Then there was Dorian. Would he even realize I was gone? Or was he too far gone to see anything other than his own pain? I had hoped to be able to pull him out of the darkness he had fallen into, but when I was gone would there be anyone to save him. To save any of them.

The only other person who had an inkling of a chance of defeating the shadows was Chess, but he was trapped himself and couldn't help anyone. He definitely was not in any position to care whether or not I was alive, not like he would either way.

My train of thought was halted when my descent slowed. My vision began to clear, allowing me to see more than just darkness. The walls were becoming more prominent and visible.

Unlike the cave above, these walls weren't just made of dirt and stone. There was a carpet like material coating the walls in a black and white zigzag pattern that made my stomach lurch. Besides the nausea inducing walls, random furniture stuck out of the sides. Chairs and beds, night stands and full dining sets. All as neat as could be, like it wasn't unusual for them to be defying gravity.

The little ball of light I created began to flicker and die out as the hole grew brighter and filled with the overwhelming sound of ticking clocks. Just as the sound began to drive me insane, clocks of every shape and size appeared on the walls. Some coo coo clocks, some were old-fashioned grandfather clocks. All of them ticked incessantly.

“Lady!”

My eyes fell below me to where I could finally see the floor. Alice sat on top of a couch, waving her arm above her head. Finally!

As my feet touched the ground, I let out the breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding and looked back up. The hole I had come from had closed up, creating a ceiling of the same pattern with the furniture stuck to the surface.

“Where are we?” I wondered out loud as I looked around the room. It seemed like everything I had passed on the way down was now cluttered into a circular shaped room with no windows or doors. The room was a junk picker’s fantasy, with more furniture than anyone could ever need, and more clocks than was sane.

“In my home.”

Alice and I turned to where the voice came from. There was a table and set of chairs stuck to the side of the wall. A tea set with four cups and steam billowing from one of them sat on the table, not a drop spilled even at the angle. A fox like creature sat at the table that wasn’t there the first time I had searched the room.

“You’re lucky I had just sat down to tea and saw you, or I wouldn’t have been able to slow down time enough to catch you. Then where would you be? Flat as a pancake on my living room floor.” A tutting sound came from it, proving it was the fox indeed that had been talking.

Nine long fluffy tails swayed in the chair behind the fox that was sipping tea from a cup. A sapphire blue vest covered his dark orange fur, and he had a dark blue tie with a shiny gold pin wrapped around his neck. Black eyes twinkled at us as his lips — did foxes have lips — curled up in an amused grin as we gaped at him.

“Well, don’t just stand there. I’m having tea, would you like some?” he gestured to the table with his teacup as if a talking fox was the most normal thing in the world.

“Um, excuse me,” clearing my throat, I passed a look to Alice before shifting my weight from one foot to the other, wanting nothing more than to take my glamour off. “Thank you for saving us, but as much as we’d really

like to stay and have tea with you, we have to be going. If you could just direct us toward the palace, we'll be on our way and out of your hair."

"The palace you say?" the fox asked, setting his cup down before him and crossing one leg over the other. The gesture was peculiar to see on a fox, even one larger than average size. "Why would you want to go to a place like that? Especially, at a time like now." He pulled a pocket watch from his vest and glanced down at the face before clucking his tongue. "Now is a not a good time to be at the palace. No matter the occasion."

"I understand that...uh...sir." Kill me now. "But we really don't have much choice in the matter. So, if you could just point the way..." I trailed off, waving Alice off before she could start to argue.

We didn't have time to get into theatrics, and every time she opened her mouth, we always ended up worse off. Not that I really had any room to talk, I'd gotten myself into my fair share of trouble because I couldn't keep my smart ass comments to myself.

"Tick. You may call me Tick." He answered, taking another sip from his cup using one hand as the pocket watch still ticked away in the other. The black lining of his lips curled around the edge of the cup, showing more finesse than one would suspect a fox to have.

"Really?" I couldn't suppress my amusement. You'd think I would be used to the weird names in the Underground after all this time, but every new one just made me want to giggle. I swallowed the urge to laugh, assuming he wouldn't appreciate it as much.

"Yes, really." His voice dared me to say another word about it before he snapped his watch closed. He slid from his chair and landed on the floor with more grace than any fox I'd ever seen. Tucking his pocket watch back into his vest, he approached Alice and me.

"As you can tell, I have a thing about time." He gestured to the clocks around the room, each one ticking their own little tune. "I keep the time here in the Underground and without me, the world as we know it would cease to exist."

Well, someone was full of themselves. The world would fall apart if he wasn't there to control the time? Like winding a clock was all that important. He could try fighting a whole horde of shadow Fae, and then we could talk about how important his job really was.

"That's really interesting." I tried to pretend to be interested in his job and not throttle him for wasting our time when all I really wanted was for

him to shut up and tell us how to get out of here.

“Don’t be smart.” Tick wagged a finger at me, which was tipped with a long sharp claw. “I don’t appreciate your sarcasm, nor do I have time for it, or you. So I suggest you forget about going to the palace and be on your way.”

I exchanged a frustrated look with Alice, who urged me with a jerk of her head to keep trying. I was getting tired of having to convince people to help me. What happened to the good ol’ days when people helped each other just for the sake of being nice?

“We would be happy to get the fuck out of your way if you would just tell us how.” I was tired of playing nice, and if being polite wasn’t going to help me, I’d do it the old fashioned way.

“I don’t see how that is my problem.” He sniffed and turned his back on us. He pulled a golden key from his pocket and stood on top of a chair to wind a clock with a mahogany finish and brass fixtures.

A growl rumbled low in my chest and my magic prickled along my skin as it bunched up in my stomach. I was this close to making this fox into my new fur coat.

“What if we made a deal?” Alice offered, placing a hand on my arm. She gave me a look that said ‘calm the fuck down’. I glared at her but took a deep breath and let it out. The magic that had balled up inside me unwound and settled back where it belonged.

While Alice was right, I couldn’t just blow our only way out of here to kingdom come, we didn’t have time for any more bullshit. The last thing I wanted to do was make deals with unknown Fae. My previous deals had not gone well. One I was still avoiding, while the other had cost me twenty dollars worth of biscuits. No. A deal was not something I was eager to do.

“A deal?” the ears on his head twitched, giving away the interest he was trying to hide in his voice. He spun around, the key clutched in his claws. Tick jumped off the chair, placing his key back in his pocket as he approached us.

Oh no. This was not going to be good. Better beat him to the punch before I found myself on the wrong end of this arrangement.

“Fine. We can make a deal but within reason.” I reached up to flip my hair over my shoulder but paused when I realized I was still glamoured and didn’t have any hair to flip. Instead, I crossed my arms over my chest and

tapped my foot. "What would be an acceptable trade for directions to the palace?"

The fox paced the room as he tapped a claw on his face. His brow furrowed as he thought about it. The sight of a fox pacing would have been funny enough a sight, but the fact that he was in a vest and tie made it hilarious. I must have given away my thoughts because Alice jabbed me in the side with a warning glare.

"I will do you one better." Tick stopped pacing and came to stand in front of us, keeping his hands held behind his back as he stood before us. "I will personally lead you to the palace if you can answer a riddle."

"A riddle?" My lips turned down in a frown. I didn't like the sound of that. "And if we get it wrong?"

The fox shrugged a gesture that should have looked awkward, but he somehow made it look natural. "Then you have to stay here as my guest for a hundred years. It gets awfully boring here all on my own and you two look like you could be entertaining." His tongue sneaked out to swipe across his jaw as his eyes leered at us.

A shiver ran down my spine. Too many animal-like creatures had given me that look lately, and it always left me wondering if they were thinking about food or sex. I couldn't decide which one was worse, bestiality or being eaten alive? The real question was did I really want to know?

"Agreed," Alice announced before I could say one way or the other.

Grabbing Alice by the elbow, I dragged her a bit away from the fox and snarled, "What the hell are you doing? You can't just agree to something like that!"

"But a hundred years is nothing." She cocked her head at me, her glamourous hair falling in a curtain over her shoulder. "Besides, I doubt any riddle he could give would be hard, he's too cute." Alice waved a little hand at him with a smile. Tick wasted no time grinning back at her, an eager gleam in his eyes.

"To you maybe. But I'm still human." I growled and then dragged a hand through my hair, yanking on the short ends, wishing for the glamour to be off and done with. "In a hundred years I will be dead! Then who will save the Underground?"

"Oh." Her lower lip popped out in a pout as if she hadn't thought that her actions could affect everything we both held dear. We couldn't just do

what we wanted all willy-nilly. Fuck! I could just strangle her right now.

“While your conversation is quite interesting,” Tick stepped in, drawing our attention back to him. “The young lady has already agreed and thus the deal can begin.” His eyes and the anxious movements of his hands as they fidgeted behind his back said there was more to it than he was letting on.

“All right, let’s get this over with,” I muttered and then pointed a finger at him with a growl. “But I’m not doing a blood oath. I don’t need your help that badly.”

“No, no, no.” he shook his paws in front of him. “I wouldn’t dream of asking such a deal.” Tick placed one pawed hand behind his back and used the other to cover his mouth as he cleared his throat. “Here is your riddle. Now think wisely before you answer because there are no do-overs.”

No do-overs my ass, I wanted to say but kept my mouth shut as he began to speak once more.

“I am never silent but have no mouth. I couldn’t shake your hand though I have two. A body I have but not a mind. I cry every hour, though I feel no pain. What am I?”

I was dumbstruck. That was his riddle? How stupid was he? There were so many around us, why would he use something that was right in front of our faces as the answer? I mean, even an imbecile could figure out the answer was a —

“Baby!”

That was the final straw. I was going to kill her. I didn’t care if she knew about the Bandersnatch; she was too much of an idiot to be helpful right now. It would have been better for everyone if she had just stayed at home.

Anger swirled in my stomach, and I had to force the crackling of my magic along my skin to calm down. Now was not the time to lose control, no matter how much I wanted to unleash all kinds of hell on her.

“The answer is not a baby.” My voice was low and dangerous, portraying exactly how much I was straining to keep my magic in check.

“It’s not?” the innocent bewilderment on her face proved she didn’t know how close she was to being plant food.

“Then what is your answer, dear?” the fox watched me, an impatient bored look on his face as if he didn’t care one way or the other if I answered the riddle right. But I wasn’t fooled, and I wouldn’t be wrong.

“A clock. The answer is a clock.” I shot daggers at Alice, who still looked confused. Why was I surprised? This was a girl who got easily tricked by the shadows.

“Is that your final answer?” Tick’s lips curled up in a mysterious smile like he knew something we didn’t. His tails whipped back and forth behind him with just as much enthusiasm.

“Yes, that’s my answer.” My voice was confident and not at all uncertain. Good for me.

“You are right!” he cried out, startling me at his sudden outburst. He grabbed my hand in his paw, shaking my hand with quick jerky motions. “Well done. In all my years as timekeeper, no one has been able to answer the riddle correctly.”

“Great,” I withdrew my hand from his clutches, trying to discreetly wipe it off on my pants. “Well then, I answered your riddle, let’s get going.”

“Quite right.” He turned away from me and pulled out the key he had used to wind the clock before he stepped up to a floor length grandfather clock. Sticking the key into a keyhole on the glass door on the front of the clock, he turned the key and the door opened with a click. Holding the door open, he turned back to us, gesturing us in.

“Thanks.” I moved toward the door, waving a hand over my shoulder for Alice to follow. “Let’s get out of here.” Before I could step into the clock, he held his hand up, stopping Alice in place.

“No, no, no.” he waved his paws with a shake of his head. “You can go, she stays.” Tick pointed a claw to me and then to Alice.

“But we got it right!”

“No, you got it right.” He shook his head not even trying to hide the glee on his face. “She didn’t.”

My hands gripped my short locks in frustration. It wasn’t fair. They kept changing the rules! At this rate, we’d never get to Chess before my mother got back from visiting Mab.

Maybe that was my problem. I kept expecting them to play fair. They’re Fae, they didn’t have the same rules as humans and even humans would screw you over if you let them. It was time I started thinking more like a Fae and less like a human.

“Fine. How about double or nothing?”

He tapped his chin with his claw, thinking on it and then waved his arms in front of him with a jerk of his head. “No, I already have her I don’t

see anything in it for me.” His eyes lingered on Alice’s glamoured form, a little too long for my liking.

“Fine.” I snapped drawing his attention back to me. “If you get it right we both stay, if you get it wrong we both get to go.”

Tick’s eyes widened and then a broad smile covered his face. “That’s more like it.” He leaned against the clock’s side, crossing one foot over the other. “All right then, what is—”

“No,” I cut him off. “You answer my riddle this time.”

Frowning, Tick stood up straight, no longer seeming so relaxed and certain he would win. Good. I held all the cards this time and I didn’t intend to lose.

“Go on then. What riddle do you have for me? I will have to warn you, though I have never been beaten. So, don’t think you can beat me with something short and simple.”

I held back a snort and suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. Short and simple, huh? Let’s see what he thinks of this one.

“What is black and white but red all over?”

He didn’t even hesitate to answer. The fox was so sure of his answer. “A Cerberus.”

“A what?”

Alice jumped in, disappointment filling her voice. “A Cerberus is a large three headed dog –like creature that is red with black and white spots.”

I was pretty sure they were insane. No way, they were thinking the same creature I was thinking about. In Greek mythology, Cerberus was the guard dog of the Underworld and while it was indeed a three-headed dog, there was nowhere that said it was red with black and white spots. That would just be ridiculous.

“See! I’m right now you both have to stay.” Tick slammed the door to the clock shut with a snap, not caring if it broke or not. He stalked toward us, his body shimmering as his eyes bore into us like he was wondering what we tasted like. I’m sure I was delicious, but I wasn’t about to let him figure that out.

“Actually, you’re wrong.” I smirked, stopping him in his tracks. It was a strange sort of satisfaction that filled my chest at telling someone who thought they knew everything they were wrong. It was almost as good as bunnies and rocky road ice cream. Almost.

“What? Wrong?” his body stopped shimmering. He shook his head like it was the most ludicrous thing he had ever heard. “I’m never wrong.”

“Ah, but you are.” I didn’t even try to hide the joy in my voice; I was so giddy I could have skipped. I wouldn’t but I could have.

“If it is not a Cerberus then what the blazes is it?” he threw his arms up in the air, his irritation at possibly being wrong seeming to build in his voice.

“The answer is a newspaper.”

“A newspaper?” he looked between us, bewilderment replacing his irritation. “What’s that?”

“It’s a paper you use to read the news. There are plenty of them in the human world.”

“You cheated. You can’t use riddles from different worlds.”

“Ah, but you never specified that at the beginning of the agreement.” I was feeling pretty proud of myself right then. “Now, we held up our end, it’s your turn to hold up yours.”

Anger covered his face, and then he adjusted his vest, his mouth forming a thin line along his jaw. “Very well, you win this one. Just give me a moment to change.”

The glimmering along his fur formed again and unlike a glamour that poured over us in a blink of an eye his transformation was a bit different. His legs and arms elongated. His fur flattened over to show smooth muscle beneath. His tail disappeared and his hair fell down to his waist in a long, fiery wave of orange. The ears on his head were traded out for pointed, Higher Fae ears and his muzzle was replaced with a strong jaw line and lips that made me want to bite them. He was still wearing his blue vest and tie, but now it seemed more obscene than adorable and luckily —or not so luckily, he had formed a pair of loose fitting pants on his lower half. The only cute thing about him now was his bare feet that wiggled on the carpet.

“If you look like this why stay in a fox form?” Alice asked, appreciation for his new look filling her eyes.

I couldn’t blame her. The fox named Tick was quite a fox himself. Suddenly, I had the urge to call a redo. Staying here with him didn’t seem like such a bad deal.

“That is my form, but those at the palace prefer my human one. Not all my kind can change like this, you know. Only those who have reached their hundredth birthday can.” He adjusted his tie and then he flipped his hair

over his shoulder. “I have just celebrated my two hundred and fifth birthday. Changing form is nothing for someone like me.”

“Well, good for you.” I stopped gawking enough to put a little sass in my voice. “But we are kind of on a schedule, so if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Always in a hurry and so rude. Is she always like this?” He gave Alice a curious look and then when he caught her staring winked at her, making her giggle like a little school girl.

“Worse.”



Chapter 8

Losing Control

THE INSIDE OF the clock was not any different than the rest of the cave above. It was dark and covered with rough dirt walls. Thankfully, this time we didn't have to rely on my magic to find where we were going. Tick had a whole light system set up along the sides of the cave, so that he could easily direct us further in. I just wished he would spend a little more time directing and a little less time flirting with Alice.

She had seemed to find a whole new liking to Tick in his new form. So much so that she continued to flirt and giggle as if we weren't on our way to the Queen's castle.

"So, why do you live down here?" Alice asked, walking beside the fox with her arms looped through his. He had become more of a gentleman once he realized he had been bested and couldn't do anything about it. Some people know how to lose gracefully, some don't. I was the latter.

"It's not like it was my choice." He snorted, sweeping his hands elaborately around us. "This would not be my first choice in homes if I had my way."

"Then why don't you move?"

I trailed behind them, letting them have their little moment. It wasn't every day that Alice got to meet someone who didn't want to blame her for everything. But since she still had the glamour on, we really didn't know if he would be accepting of her or not. If he had been down here this whole time, he might not even know who she was or care.

"I would, darling, but it's my job." He patted her hand, with a sullen sigh. "Part of the job description requires me to be secluded from the outside world. The JubJub bird is supposed to keep visitors out." He glared at me over his shoulder. "Bad things can happen when people think they can mess with my clocks."

"What's so special about them? They just keep time." I thought back to his room full of clocks and wondered what mysterious power they had that required a guard bird like the JubJub.

“They are not just clocks!” Tick halted our procession, dropping Alice’s arm and turning to me. “I will have you know that I have a very important job, one that requires dedication and sacrifice. Not just anyone can be in charge of time. It is a difficult task that doesn’t allow for much outside interference. The fact that I am even taking time away from my duties to take you to the palace could have exponential consequences. Did you ever think of that?”

He gnashed his teeth at me, rage building on his face, and I felt my own anger respond, which in turn, caused my magic to flare to life.

“I’ll have you know.” I stalked toward him, shoving a finger at his chest. “While you may be the keeper of time, there are other people in this world that are doing just as important tasks.” I felt a sense of satisfaction as each poke to his chest, caused him to step backward. “Ones that require far more sacrifice than having to spend all of eternity winding damn clocks. Do you know how much pressure comes with being the savior? How many times I’ve wanted to just forget it all happened and turn my back on this place?” I waved my hands around me, the magic in my veins fueling my anger to extraordinary heights. It was like all the built up fear and denial had finally come to its tipping point and was spilling out all at once.

“Savior?” Tick stuttered, his eyes full of fear as he glanced at Alice and me. “You’re the savior? The Seelie Princess reincarnate?”

“What the hell have I been saying the last few minutes?” I threw my hands up in the air with a growl. My powers leaked out, causing the ground to shake around us. “Haven’t you heard? I’m dangerous.” I moved in close until our noses were almost touching. “I’m a loose cannon just waiting to go off.”

“But you’re a half-breed.” The moment the words left his mouth he realized his mistake, and he scrambled back from me, but there was nowhere to go. He was literally backed against a wall and at my mercy.

The power within me begged to be released, and instead of forcing it back down, I let it. I let it pour into the floor around me. Bright green plant life spread across the cave and up the walls. Vines shot out from around the fox and wrapped around his body until he was trapped, unable to move let alone speak.

But it wasn’t enough. He thought he knew pain? Sacrifice? I wanted him to feel what it was like to be the only one to save the worlds. The only one that was powerful enough to stop the Shadows. The claustrophobic

feeling of being crushed on all sides that consumed me every night until all I dreamed about was ending it all.

Tick cried out as the vines squeezed him. His eyes filled with such utter terror, like he knew he was going to die and there was nothing he could do about it. The bad thing was I didn't care.

"Stop." Alice appeared next to me, her voice slow as if not to spook me. She placed her hand on my arm. "You are going to bring the whole cave down on top of us, and we still need him to get us into the palace. You can't kill him, not now." She rubbed my arm with soothing motions that only served to irritate me rather than soothe me.

I shrugged her hand off and spun on my heel. As I marched away from them, I pulled my magic with me, and the sound of Tick gasping for air sounded from behind me. Ignoring them, I headed toward the direction Tick had been leading us as I tried to get a grip on my anger and the never ending need to destroy something.

Being the savior wasn't something I asked for. Hell, I hadn't even wanted to be on the school council in high school, being in charge of things had never been something I was good at. I was more of a do my own thing kind of girl, not a 'let's be sure everyone else is alive and enjoying themselves'. It took major self-control just to keep my mouth shut and not tell them all to fuck off half the time, not that I didn't let it slip out every once in a while.

Each step I took caused the ground to shake and small plant life to creep out of the dirt floor. I couldn't seem to control my magic now that the floodgate had been opened. My heart was pounding in my ears, and I couldn't even hear if Alice and Tick were following behind me. If I was more in my right mind I would have stopped to check, but my only thoughts were to keep moving so I didn't completely break down.

The path Tick had been leading us down didn't have any turns or forks. It went straight through the cave and ended at a dead end. Except it wasn't a dead end. On the wall was a full-length mirror, not unlike those seen around the palace.

"Uh...Lady?" Alice's hesitant voice reached out to me. My eyes searched for her through the mirror's surface and waited for her to continue. "Your glamour is gone."

Startled by her statement, my gaze fixated on my reflection.

She was right. In the midst of my fit, the glamour I had so meticulously held in place had melted away leaving me in my true form. Even the green of my eyes had been burned away and replaced with the raging blue of my Fae eyes.

The face that reflected back at me, terrified me more than the Shadows, more than losing Chess to the Bandersnatch, and more than death itself. The face looking back at me, while still my human face, made me frighteningly similar to the Seelie Queen.

It was like a punch to the stomach that caused all my anger to cool. My magic fizzled out and stopped sprouting around me. The icy glow to my eyes became just eyes again and sadness filled my heart.

What was I becoming? I wasn't like her. I didn't use my powers against others because I could. The Fae in me had been more than less dormant. Allowing me to have the best of being a magical creature without getting too power hungry. It seemed like the longer I was in the Underground the more I was losing control of myself, and I couldn't have that.

Swallowing my despair, I turned to the two and almost cried at the looks on their face. I had put that fear there. It was me who had been this close to terrorizing them, just because I couldn't control myself.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that." Hugging my arms close, I chewed on my lip, my anger replaced with uncertainty.

"You should be!" Tick shouted, and then snapped his mouth shut as if afraid of what I would do for his outburst.

"Stop, please." Sighing, I ran a hand through my hair, giving it a satisfying tug. It was so much better to be in my own skin with my own hair again. "I don't want you to be afraid of me. That wasn't supposed to happen."

"What did happen, Lady?" Alice took a hesitant step forward, her glamour still in place, making the look on her face hard to decipher. "I've never seen you lose control like that."

"It's happened before." My frown deepened as I remember the first time it happened.

It was the first time I'd had dinner with my family in a long time, and of course, that meant my mother was going to ride my ass the whole night. Luckily, Chess was there to act as a buffer, but that didn't keep her from poking at sensitive subjects. When I lost my temper, my human body was

still getting used to my powers, and couldn't control the rush of magic that came with my anger.

The feeling of magic pouring out of me and into the earth, of creating new life just from myself was an overwhelming drunk feeling. I had felt invincible, like I could do anything. But magic had a cost, and if Chess hadn't been there, I might have burned myself out completely. Maybe even died.

Alice being here might not have had the same effect as Chess, but she did keep me from killing not only me, but also someone else. I had to get a grip on myself, or I wouldn't make it to the Shadows in one piece.

Shaking off the thoughts, I turned to Alice, "You might as well get rid of your glamour, Alice. The gig, as they say, is up." I giggled at my own little joke, though it was kind of a pathetic attempt to lighten the mood.

"If you say so." Alice pursed her lips and let her glamour go, revealing her normally blonde hair and blue dress. It seemed she was dead set on seeing Hatter again while dressed like her old self. Oh well, it was her thing, not mine.

"So then, Tick." I turned to the mirror in front of me once more. "I'm assuming this is the entrance into the palace?"

"Yes." His voice was stronger now, less fearful, but still cautious.

Ignoring the need to reassure him, I reached up to activate the mirror. My hand almost touched the frame when I stopped and spun around, my eyes narrowing on the fox.

"If you use a mirror to get into the palace, how do you activate it? You aren't a half-breed."

Alice's eyes moved to Tick as well. There was something wrong, and it smelled like a fox.

"Well, you see...uh..." he stumbled over his words, his hands wringing in front of him. "The thing is..." his answer was cut off when his eyes darted to something behind me, he then pulled his watch out of his pocket and tapped the glass. "Oh look at the time. I must be getting back now. Bye!" Before I could stop him, he transformed back into a fox and darted back the way we came.

"What the hell was that about?" I asked Alice who was staring at something behind me with fear in her eyes. "Alice, what is it? What are you looking at?" My head turned to find what she was looking at only to be caught in the icy glare of the Seelie Queen.

“Daughter, how nice to see you again.”



Chapter 9

Compromise

THE SEELIE QUEEN stood in the frame of the mirror, an amused, but sharp stare protruding through the surface. Her white gown clung to her curves, almost translucent in the library's light. It showed me more of my mother than I ever wanted to see. Her long white hair, the same shade as mine was piled on her head in a series of braids that gave the illusion of a crown.

She wasn't alone in the library. At her back were at least half a dozen guards, all armed with their golden armor and shiny swords. They stood menacingly, waiting for her command. I wondered if they remembered what happened the last time they came up against me.

When my eyes scanned across them, a few of them flinched, and I tried not to smile. Good. They remembered.

"Hello, Mother." No need to be rude right off the bat. "We weren't expecting you back so soon. We had hoped to surprise you."

"Well, my dear cousin needed to be alone so I came rushing back here the moment I found out you were coming. You know your father isn't very good at keeping secrets." Her smile was nasty while her words were playing the polite game.

"I hope you weren't too cross with him?" The warning in my voice was clear. She better not have hurt him or there would be hell to pay.

"Worried for your father now? You didn't seem so the last time you were here." She laughed and then placed a finger to her chin. "In fact, you didn't seem to care about anyone but yourself and that half-breed. Now, why is that, I wonder?"

Sighing, I chanced a look at Alice who was cowering behind me. She seemed to be trying to make herself as small as possible. She wasn't going to be any help as long as the queen was around. I might have instilled fear into the guards, but my mother still held the crown of Queen Bitch.

"The fox was yours I take it?" I chose to ignore her previous question, knowing that anything I said would just drive me into a deeper hole than I was already in.

“All Fae are mine, Daughter.” The implication in her voice that said even you was not lost on me. My nails bit into my hands as I tightened my fists to restrain my need to correct her. I ground my teeth together to keep from saying something that would set her off.

“I am not here to argue or fight, Mother. I want him back.”

“Who?” she pretended like she didn’t know what I was talking about for a moment, and then shook her head with a secret smile. “Oh, that feline. I don’t know why, he has done nothing but string you along, and then the moment you declared your love for him, he broke your heart. I would be a bad mother if I didn’t punish those who hurt my little girl.”

I fought back the laugh that threatened to come from my throat. Take care of those who hurt me? She was doing a bang up job on her own.

“But I’m not a little girl anymore. I can take care of myself.” I tried to reason with her, no longer wanting to play the game I started.

“That remains to be seen.” She sniffed and looked down at me with disapproval in her eyes. “Anyways, I’m tired of standing in this drafty library, come through and we can discuss this like civilized adults.”

She was being nice. Too nice. There had to be something she wanted, or something she was planning.

My lips twisted in an unpleasant grimace before I reached up to touch the frame. Alice’s hand stopped me before I could activate it.

“What is it?” I lowered my hand and turned to her.

“What if it’s a trap?” she whispered, her eyes darting to the glass and back. “I’m still a fugitive, remember? What if it’s just a trap to throw me back in that cell? I won’t want to go back there, I won’t!”

I hadn’t thought of Alice’s position in the Underground, or what making her come with me would mean. I grabbed her hand in mine and gave my attention back to my mother, who wasn’t even pretending not to be eavesdropping on us.

“Before I come through, I need to make a deal.”

“Oh?” her eyes lit up in a way that I knew nothing good would come from. “A deal? That’s new. I’m assuming this has to do with the little faker?”

I winced at the title Alice had earned from her wish. While Alice might be Fae now, she wasn’t always, and being magically endowed by a tree wasn’t something that the born Fae were very fond of. Being Fae wasn’t something you could just buy, and that was pretty much exactly

what she had done. It didn't win her any fans, not that her tricking Dorian helped her cause any.

"I need you to promise not to hurt Alice or put her back in that Hall of Mirrors. It wasn't her fault she was tricked."

"But it is her fault that my darling girl got her heart broken." Her eyes shot an icy laser at Alice, who cringed and cowered beside me. "She had to be punished."

"Fine. She was punished. Now it's done."

"But what do I get in return? Pardoning a criminal is a high price, and I require equal payment."

"And what would be suitable payment for the life of one of your citizens?" Regret instantly formed in my throat at my question. I had opened myself up to whatever she wanted in return. I could only hope whatever she wanted was something I was willing to give.

She didn't even think about it. The moment I asked the question she was talking again, "I want your word that you will not try to take the Seelie throne until the time that I step down."

Of course she would want something worth more than what we were trading for, though it was only worth more to her than to me. She had made it clear where her thoughts were, and she found me a threat to her power. Well, she could keep her stinking throne and all that went with it. I didn't want it. Not that I was going to tell her that.

"I have a condition to add to that trade." I cleared my throat and tried to sound as superior as possible. "If you are to stay on the throne, I believe it is only fair that a council of your peers — not selected by you, but by the people," I continued before she could say anything, "To have final say in all major decision concerning the court and its citizens." Her mouth opened to protest, but I held a hand up. "It's a reasonable request seeing as how you caused this whole mess with the Shadows in the first place by making such decisions on your own."

Her eyebrows furrowed and a gnashing frown distorted her face. She wasn't happy with my condition, but the fact that she was thinking about it said that she knew I was right. But the question was would she do what was right, or would her pride get in the way?

After what seemed like hours, she finally threw up her hands in defeat. "Fine. I agree to your conditions. We will hold elections after this whole Shadows ordeal is dealt with. Agreed?"

I thought about it for a moment. Was there a way she could get around this? Had I messed up in some way? If the council was elected and not appointed by her then it would be less likely that she would be able to sway them to her way of thinking by bribery or threats. There really wasn't much else I could do to keep her in line without taking the throne myself. And I so did not want to do that.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Do you not wish to save your beau?" A twinge of irritation pinched her face, and she showed the first signs of being nervous by fussing with her skirt.

"No, I'm coming." My eyes met Alice's anxious face one last time before I reached my hand back up to touch the edge of the mirror.

The moment my hand touched the frame the familiar ripple coasted across the surface, activating the magic that Pat had no doubt put there. I took Alice's hand in mine giving it a tight squeeze, though I wasn't sure if it was more to reassure me or her. I think we both needed a little bit of comfort at this point.

When Alice and I stepped through the mirror and landed on the other side, I knew instantly something was wrong. The smile on my mother's face was just too happy for shit not to be hitting the fan. My question was answered when the guards circled Alice and me, their swords at the ready.

"What's going on?" I kept my eyes on the guards, my body tense and ready for whatever they might throw at us. I wasn't too worried, last time she had thrown more guards than this at me, and I took them all out without a sweat. But I had also been high on rage at the time, right now all I felt was uncertainty.

"I'm not doing anything, dear." The laugh that came out of her was wicked and full of self-satisfaction.

I glanced from the guards to her pale white face. "Then call your goons off."

"Goons?"

This time when she laughed it was like tinkling bells with an edge. It shivered along my arms and down my spine. It wasn't a pleasant feeling.

"You heard her boys, back off."

At her orders, the guards lowered their weapons but didn't move. They stayed circled around Alice and me, their eyes locked on us like we were going to attack them at any moment. If I had time for it I probably would have.

Deciding to ignore the little show she was putting on, I turned to her, my face deadly serious. "I'm here. Now can we please discuss Chess?"

"You are just no fun." My mother gave an overdramatic sigh, her hands holding up her dress as she approached me, circling me like the vulture she was. "Unlike, the half-breed. He used to be a lot of fun. Though, he still is in a different kind of way." A secretive smile covered her face and it made me sick to my stomach.

Had she and Chess? Had they? I couldn't even imagine it. My stomach rolled and I felt like I was going to be sick.

"Are you all right? You are looking a bit pale." She smoothed a hand along my back, patting it like the doting mother she wasn't. The feel of it along my spine made my skin crawl, and I did everything in my power not to jerk away from her.

"You." She pointed a finger at the guard who'd had fear in his eyes when I looked at him. "Go get us something to drink and a cool cloth and bring it to my room. My daughter is feeling ill and we must make sure she is well taken care of."

Turning back to me, she placed a hand on my face and I let her. "Come, let us retire to my boudoir and we can discuss this unhealthy obsession with that ridiculous cat."

She looped her arm through mine and led me toward the library door. I walked with her until I noticed that Alice was not following. She was still by the mirror with guards all around her.

"Wait." I planted my feet on the floor causing her to stop in her tracks. "What about Alice? She needs to come too."

"But whatever for?" she cocked her head to the side, a questioning frown on her face. "She can't help you save the cat. There is no reason why she needs to be present at all. She'll be fine, my guards will be sure she is taken care of. Besides," She hugged me close to her and whispered gently, "We haven't had mother-daughter time in a long time. I think we are passed due, don't you?" she smiled at me ending her words with a high-pitched lilt.

Did I really want to have mother-daughter time with the Seelie Queen? No. Did I believe for one minute that Alice would be safe with the guards? Hell, no. But did I really have a choice?

Alice in a moment of courage I would never have expected from her spoke out, "Go ahead, Lady. I'll be fine." She placed her hands on her hips, giving the guards a haughty glare. "These bullies don't frighten me." I half

expected her to stick her tongue out at them, but she didn't, and just did her best to seem as intimidating as possible for a girl in a powder blue tea dress. Good for her. She was more mature than me.

"See, all is well." she placed a hand on my lower back, driving me back toward the library door and leaving poor Alice lost in a wonder of men.



I HADN'T BEEN TO MY parent's room in like, well, ever. We weren't that close of a family, and besides meals and the occasional visit from my father in the library, I didn't really see them that often. My mother, as most could tell, was not exactly the maternal type, and I sure as hell didn't come running to her when I was scared or hurt. I had a nanny for that.

It was funny how my human life had been painted in almost the exact same way as my Fae one. Except for the arranged marriage and the dying. Those I was happy to not have written into my second life.

A servant opened large doubled doors, decorated with golden vines and leaves. The servant kept its eyes down when the queen passed but snuck a look at me when my mother wasn't looking. Unable to help myself, I gave the servant a wink, causing them to startle and blush.

I kept our encounter quiet and made my face stay neutral as I entered the room. I wouldn't want her to think I was having too much fun, or she might do something really atrocious. Not that the threats to mine and my friends' lives weren't already bad enough.

The room we entered had to be the sitting room, because there was only a sofa, colored in a deep red with matching armchairs and a coffee table in between. The red was the color of dried blood, making the room less welcoming and more like a crime scene. Apparently, the white and gold décor wasn't something she cared for either.

The walls were just as bad, colored in a bright red that seemed to drip down the surface as if it was a living being and bleeding. I kept away from the furniture and walls and let out a breath of relief when she didn't linger in the room. She went straight for a door on the right side of the room.

There was another door on the left side that was either a bathroom or something else altogether. It might have been my father's room. I wasn't sure if they were still sleeping in the same room or not. If I were him, I

wouldn't want to breathe, let alone sleep in the same room as her. She might get into my dreams, or worse, my nightmares.

"Here we are." She twirled around, her arms and skirt spinning around with her. "This is more like it." She finished her rotation and let herself fall onto the bed with as much grace as a falling angel. Her skirts spread around her on the black duvet, making her dress stand out like a beacon on a dark night.

I searched around the room for somewhere to sit but there was only the bed, a couple nightstands, and one of those wooden standing closets. I sure as hell wasn't going to sit on the bed with her, so I stood.

"Now, daughter." She leaned back on her arms and threw one leg over the other as if posing for a camera. "Tell me. Why would you risk coming here for a half-breed? A half-breed, who not only doesn't return your feelings, but threw them back in your face."

"I need him." I didn't ask how she knew what happened between Chess and me. There were plenty of ways she could have found out. I wouldn't put it past her to have spies watching me all the time. I could only hope it was spies and not that she tortured it out of Chess.

"Yes, you said that already. But why? Why do you need him?" Her fingers tapped out a tune unknown to me on the bed, her face intently focused on mine.

"Like how you need father."

The way her face scrunched up at the thought of needing my father answered the question I had been wondering for a while. She didn't need him. She probably didn't even love him. He was probably just the right guy for the job, like how she thought Dorian was the right guy for me.

"I love him," I tried again.

"So? He doesn't love you."

I sighed, suddenly feeling tired. How do you explain love to someone who has probably never felt it in their life? It occurred to me then that I felt bad for her. I didn't know how old she was, but considering we could pretty much live forever, she had to be close to a thousand. A thousand years and never knowing love? Unimaginable.

"It doesn't matter if he loves me or not. I can't let him rot for not loving me."

"Well, that is just ridiculous. Of course you can. You are a princess and the savior. You can do whatever you want." She sat up on the bed, placing

her hands delicately on her knees as she watched me. “For instance, if you wanted a hundred lovers you could have them like that.” She snapped her fingers together, the sound of it reverberated through the room and three men popped into existence, each shirtless and attractive enough to make even a nun drool.

My mother gestured toward me, and the men turned their heated eyes my way. Each of them stalked upon me like I was prey ready to be devoured. I put my hands up in front of me and shook my head.

“No, I’m good.” I gave them a weak smile, hoping it would deter them. It didn’t. They circled around me, their hands going to my waist, my hair, and my hands. I tried to brush their hands off, but they were persistent in their caresses. “Not that you guys aren’t hot as hell, but I’m really a one man kind of girl and — would you stop it!” I shouted out sending a shot of magic out along my skin when one of their hands got too close to my nethers for comfort. The shock of my magic made their hands drop away and I could breathe again.

“Get rid of them,” I demanded, a crackling green energy hovered over my skin, the only thing keeping the men from trying to paw at me again.

“Very well.” my mother sighed, disappointment in her voice. She snapped her fingers again, and I was blessedly alone again. “If you don’t want a lover, I don’t understand how you could risk your life for the half-breed. He isn’t that great in bed.”

“Let me put it into words that you will understand then.” I held my hands up letting her see the magic that still hadn’t been called back. “I need Chess. I want him and I want him now. If not for my own feelings but for the sake of the Shadows.”

“The Shadows?”

I rolled my eyes. “What are you going to do if I fail? Who is going to take them on then?” When her lips pursed into a tight frown, I knew I was getting to her. “If something happens to me, he is your best bet to beat them, and he can’t do that from inside the Bandersnatch.”

“Fine. You may have your cat.” She waved her arm, and the doors of her wardrobe opened. The moment it did the room felt colder. Darker.

I inched toward the closet. On one of the doors hung a mirror. The mirror was the length of the door and didn’t have a frame. The surface of it was black and did not reflect anything back. It was like a void sucking in all

the light and happiness in the world. I could feel it trying to get its claws into me as I stood near it.

I kept my eyes on the surface of the mirror as I held my hand up. This wasn't the first time I had encountered a mirror so dark, so full of evil. I doubted it would be the last.

When my hand touched the surface it wasn't solid, but it wasn't like the other mirrors. This one didn't ripple along the surface, and when I pulled my hand back it let go with a suctioned pop!

"A warning, daughter." My mother's voice called out behind me, and I didn't turn away from the mirror to answer her. "Those who enter the Bandersnatch don't come out. Ever."

"I'll get out," I said with more confidence than I had. "I have to."



Chapter 10

Bandersnatch

IT WAS LIKE trying to fight my way through one of those goopy toys kids play with, the kind that was wet and left a smelly rubber residue on your hands afterward. It filled every orifice until I felt like I was suffocating in black ooze. It seemed to last forever until suddenly it stopped. I popped out the other side as if it had finally had enough of me.

The other side wasn't any better. The air was thick, making it hard to breathe. Since there was no light it made the overpowering feeling worse.

I stood there for a moment, getting used to the pressure on my lungs. There was a sudden urge to run and an overwhelming need to panic that crept its way into my heart. It wasn't the darkness that was getting to me but the silence.

There was nothing. No wind. No background noise. All I could hear was the pounding of my own heart, and that wasn't a sound I would want to spend eternity listening to.

"Hello!" I called out, not moving from my spot in the darkness. "Chess?"

There was no answer.

Not getting anywhere standing here, I took a cautious step forward. Then another. The floor didn't give out on me, and nothing grabbed at me, so I kept going. I walked through the darkness, not knowing where I was going, or what was out there. It terrified me.

After what felt like hours of walking, I finally heard something. Voices. Or more specifically, yelling.

"You are nothing!"

"A leech."

"Worthless. Pathetic excuse for a Fae."

The insults just got worse and came from different voices. As I got closer I could hear something else, something underneath the nasty words that was muffled and strained.

It sounded like...crying?

I was almost on top of the voices now and the darkness had peeled back like worn paint to reveal a dim corner. In the corner surrounded by floating heads was a small child.

He couldn't have been older than five or six. His face was covered in dirt but there were trails of white running down his cheek from his tears. His hands pressed down on the ears on his head, that even in the dim light were distinctly stripped. A tail was tucked between his legs and his body was shaking in its place.

"Chess?"

My voice caused the child to look up from where he was trying to ball himself into the corner. Bright green eyes full of fear and despair looked back at me without a hint of recognition.

"Go away!" he yelled, his hands up as if to ward me off. "Leave me alone."

My foot paused mid-air, not sure what my course of action should be. He didn't seem to know who I was, and his appearance proved there was more than simple magic at play.

"Hey." I knelt down on the ground and scooted toward him, trying to seem as harmless as possible. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm here to help you."

"No, you aren't! You aren't real. You're just a trick to mess with my mind." He shoved his hands back over his ears; the voices grew louder as if to drown out my words. "You aren't real. You aren't real," he muttered over and over to himself while rocking in the corner.

My heart broke for him. Was this what the Bandersnatch was? Instead of physically torturing you it played on your fears and ate at you until you went insane. I'd rather have had a bullet to the brain.

When I reached his side, I placed a hand on his head. He yelped and flinched away from me, his head shooting up to look at me with terror in his eyes.

"Please don't hurt me. I'll be good. I promise!" his words broke as he began to cry again, and I couldn't stand it anymore.

I wrapped my arm around him drawing him in against me. He struggled against my hold for a moment and then seemed to relax into my embrace. I let him cry and rocked him, making soothing noises in the back of my throat. The entire time the voices around us roared up into a deafening scream.

Getting a headache and quite literally fed up, I pulled on my magic until it warmed me. Chess stiffened in my embrace but didn't pull away. When I built enough energy up, I turned my head toward the floating heads.

"Silence!" my voice echoed through the darkness, and the power behind it quieted their voices. The heads just floated there now, not making a sound. "Don't you have something else to do besides torture a poor child?"

The heads actually exchanged a look before one of them, an older gentleman, opened his mouth to say, "No. Not really. It's our job." He seemed to shrug, though he had no shoulders. "And that is no more a child than you are, that is just what is left of the sinner."

"What are you?" I asked, pulling Chess closer to me when a few of them leered down at him. I didn't care if he wasn't a child, they had reverted him back to his child form and that was good enough for me.

There was always something worse about torturing a child. Like some kind of internal instinct that made you want to protect them. Of course, this child had been naked and rolling around in my sheets with me a week ago, and had quite thoroughly broken my heart, but that didn't make it any better.

"We are the Bandersnatch," the leader of the heads explained. "We serve justice to those who have sinned. And this child, as you so see him as, has sinned oh so very much." A delighted shrill filled his voice. "There is so much wickedness there we are almost full up on it. Not that we could ever be full." He shared a chuckle with his fellow floating heads.

I stared down at the child in my arms. Wicked? Chess was a lot of things. Womanizer. Liar. Cheat. But wicked? I didn't think so. I would know if I loved someone that evil. Wouldn't I?

Turning back to the heads, I asked, "Then why not let him go? You have had your fill. There is no reason to keep him here any longer."

"Ah," another one of the heads, a young woman spoke up this time. "But we can't, you see. The queen gave him to us to punish and we must punish, we must."

The way her eyes zeroed in on Chess had me pulling him so tightly to my chest that he squeaked. Loosening my grip on him, I focused on the leader. "It was the queen who sent me here to retrieve him. He was wrongfully imprisoned and must now be set free."

A gasp from the heads filled the room, and then they were talking at once. The air in the room became thicker as the heads bobbed back and forth, each trying to speak over the other.

“Quiet!” the leader called out, causing the other heads to abruptly pause. His dark eyes locked onto me, and it took all I had not to gulp at the intensity of his gaze. “There has never been a case where we have been wrong. He is evil and was given to us, thus we will not let him go. Queen or not.”

“So you would defy your queen?” I asked a cautious edge to my voice. I didn’t know what they would do if I kept pressing them, but I wasn’t about to just leave Chess here now that I had him.

“What will she do? Punish us?” the heads shared a laugh before the leader’s face sobered, this time when he spoke his voice shook the space, and I felt his words down to my bones, “We are the Bandersnatch, the thing of nightmares. Your fear is our food and no one—not even a queen, can stop us.”

Chess whimpered and buried his head further into my chest. As always, my mind immediately went to an inappropriate place, and I found that if he had been in full form we would be in quite a compromising position. The sounds of his distress made me chide my own thoughts. Child or not, he still had a child-like mentality, and I shouldn’t be thinking such things. The Bandersnatch, on the other hand, was messing with the wrong girl.

“You may be the thing of nightmares but you don’t scare me.” I stood from the ground, bringing Chess up with me. His small hands clung to my leg and his tail came out from between his thighs to wrap around my calf.

The laugh that came from the heads caused Chess and me to cringe. It was dark and full of power. The sound of it seemed to ignite something in the room, causing the scene around us to change. We were no longer in the complete darkness but in the Mushroom City, and standing before me was the blackened mirror leading to the Shadow’s Between.

“We have touched your mind and know what you fear.” The leader circled around us, his cronies following his lead.

This was their big power? Using glamours was something I knew about and the scene before me was a shit job at one if I had ever seen it. A scoff came out of me before I could think about it.

“You laugh?” he shouted his face turning a reddish purple. “We have brought you to the source of your fear and instead of quivering in terror you laugh, why?”

“First off,” I gestured around the area, trying to keep my smile to a minimum, “You suck at glammers. A four-year-old could change the scenery easily. Secondly,” I held up two fingers, “Come on, really? Out of all the things I’m afraid of you pick this?”

A giggle came from the feline wrapped around my thigh, his tiny face looked up to me with a small smile. Good. At least, he wasn’t crying anymore. I placed my hand on his head, smoothing the hair between his ears and returning his grin with one of my own.

Chess’ laughter must have really pissed the heads off, because they began to spin faster and faster around us. Their voices came out in unison, “We will teach you the meaning of fear, girl!”

Instead of being smart and preparing for their attack, I yelled back, “Give me your best shot!”

The Mushroom City melted away and in its place was a white empty room. The sudden change of lighting made my eyes hurt, and I squinted until they adjusted. The heads were no longer in sight, their voices were gone and the air lighter than before.

“Are they gone?” Chess let go of my leg, but he kept a hand on the edge of my clothing.

I waited, my eyes searching the room. They wouldn’t have left so suddenly for no reason. It had to be a trick of some kind.

After a moment or so with nothing happening, I reached down and grasped Chess’ hand in mine. “Keep close to me, and no matter what happens, don’t let go of my hand.” With a nod of his head, he tightened his grip on my hand.

The room was empty of any furniture or windows but there was a door. One dark red door stood out against the white walls. Well, if that wasn’t ominous then I didn’t know what was.

They wanted us to go through the door. They expected it. I hated doing what was expected of me, but at the moment, I didn’t really have much of a choice.

Taking a deep breath, I let it out and glanced down at Chess. “Ready? Then let’s get the hell out of here.”

We made our way across the white room and toward the red door. Each step we took was harder than the last. The door seemed to pulsate in its frame. It bulged out toward us like it was a living, breathing thing. A whimper came from Chess, and I was jerked back as he stopped.

“What is it?” the pure terror on his face caused my insides to ache.

“I don’t want to go.” His voice was tiny and his words shook.

I had the sudden urge to pull him into my arms again and never let go. God forbid he asked anything of me in this form. A child form of Chess was a hard thing to say no to. It made me wonder if our children would look just as adorable.

Our children? I started. Where the hell did that come from? He didn’t even want to be my boyfriend, what made me think he would want to have children with me?

The frown that had formed on my face must have seemed angry, because Chess began to back away from the door and me. I held my hands up and slowly approached him.

“No, no. Hey. It’s okay. I’m not mad.” I reached out to him and dropped to one knee. “I was just thinking of something unpleasant. It’s all right.”

He hesitated, his eyes on my hand and then to the breathing door behind us. Visibly swallowing, he seemed to decide that I was the lesser of two evils and came back to my side. His hand firmly clasped in mine, he let me lead him back to the door and hopefully to our way out.

Before I could place a hand on the doorknob, the door blasted open, throwing us back a few paces. Getting up from the ground, I grabbed Chess and pushed him behind me, my attention primarily on the open doorway. Then the smoke started.

Black, wispy trundles slowly built into a large billowing cloud that covered the surface of the room. No. Not yet. Not now. I wasn’t ready. Fear started in my belly, making its way up my throat and choking me as I fell to my knees. Chess held onto me, crying and shaking me as if it would snap me out of it.

I knew that smoke, what lived inside of it. Avoiding it had been a pass time for me that was so familiar when the time came to come face to face to the being behind it I wasn’t sure I would be able to stand up to it let alone beat it.

Nothing followed the smoke, and I realized something, it wasn't real. Just like the Mushroom City, it was just an illusion. The real Shadows were with Dorian, doing God knows what, and wouldn't waste their time with theatrics such as this.

Suddenly, I could breathe again. The fear dissipated and, with it, the smoke. I brought myself to my feet and took a deep breath in.

"Sorry about that." I gave a weak smile to Chess before picking him up into my arms. No more playing around. It was time to get out of here and nothing else was going to stop me, least of all a Goddamn illusion.

With a newfound determination, I crossed the room and didn't stop until I was out the door and into the dark. Unlike before though, I had a plan.

I snapped my fingers and called up my magic, the sound echoed in the dark. A ball of light that grew bigger and bigger lit up the area, showing us the mirror entrance not even ten feet away. Of course, as soon as we made our way toward the mirror, the heads reappeared.

"What do you think you are doing?"

"You should be paralyzed with fear, not escaping."

"Get back here!"

The heads screamed out at us, causing Chess to tense in my arms, but I ignored them. Let them bitch and moan. My eyes were all for the mirror, and I wasn't stopping for anyone or anything.

Just as I reached the mirror, one of them asked, "What are you?"

This time answered but didn't stop as a confident smile spread over my face. "The one who will save us all, even your sorry asses." With those parting words, I shoved Chess and me through the tar-like substance and we fell out the other side. We landed at the feet of a waiting Alice.



Chapter 11

Can We Keep Him?

ALICE WAS STANDING in the middle of the queen's room, her hands on her hips and an impatient frown on her face. There were no guards in sight, and my mother was mysteriously gone as well.

"Where is everybody?" I set Chess on the ground, but he stayed latched onto my pant leg, his gaze unwavering as he took in Alice's form.

"I was in the library with the guards where we were having a good old time playing guess which guard was real. Come to find out that guards aren't very talented in seeing through a glamour." She smiled at the memory, and then frowned, and shrugged. "Then a servant came running in, screaming about some monster bird at the palace gates. They went rushing out, not paying me any mind. So I came up here. Your mother wasn't in here, but who could blame her, look at this décor." She glanced around the room and made a face.

"Oh." What else was I supposed to say? Lucky us, a disaster had come just in the nick of time? Though, more than likely it was our fault there was an emergency in the first place. A monster bird? Sounded like the JubJub to me.

"Who's that?" Alice pointed down to the child fastened to my leg and then her face brightened. "Oh my goodness. That's not, is it?"

I nodded my head and bent down to pry Chess off me. "Yep. We seem to have a situation on our hands."

"But he's so cute!" she squealed, clapping her hands together before kneeling on the floor next to us.

Chess stared at her for a moment, and then gave me a questioning look over his shoulder. I made a motion with my hand, urging him forward. That seemed to be all he needed before he ran into Alice's open arms. What do you know? He was a ladies man even at this age.

I watched as Alice cooed and cuddled with the feline, a small smile on my face. He was just too adorable, and he had such innocence to him. It was tempting to keep him this way forever. But I couldn't. I hadn't been lying when I told my mother that I needed him, I did. Not just because I felt

I was guilty he got taken because of me, but he really was the only chance we had if something happened to me. I couldn't go up against the Shadows without a backup plan, and he was it.

"Not that he isn't the cutest thing I have ever seen," Alice started, holding Chess in her lap, "But how did this happen?"

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "From what I understand when the Bandersnatch feeds off your fear they reduce you backwards in time. This," I gestured toward the feline, "Is all that was left of him when I got there."

"Oh you poor thing!" Alice cried out, pulling him tightly against her chest. "How horrible it must have been for you and to torture a child?" she shook her head in disgust.

"Yes, we have already established that, any ideas how to change him back?"

"Change me back?" Chess poked his head up from Alice's embrace. "To what?"

The question was so endearing; I seriously had to force myself not to start baby talking to him. I could tell by the look on Alice's face that she was having the same issue.

"Do we have to change him back? I mean, can't we just leave him the way he is? Then he can have another chance at a good childhood!" Her eyes lit up and she glanced down at Chess with a smile. "Would you like that, little one? Do you want to come home with Mama Alice?"

Before Chess could answer, I jumped in, "No. Absolutely not."

"Why not?" she pouted, giving me her best puppy dog eyes. "It would be so fun."

"Fun?" I gaped. "Not only is it wrong, but where are you planning on raising him? At my house? I don't think so." I shook my head at her.

"Don't you want to give him the childhood he never had? Then maybe he wouldn't have grown up to become such a rake." She petted a hand down his dirty pink hair, her face softening with her words.

It wasn't like I didn't want Chess to have better memories. God knew he needed them. But I couldn't imagine having him living in my home the way he was now. It wasn't just wrong. It was creepy.

Every time I saw him I would remember what he used to look like and then how we almost were together. Also, what was I going to do once he grew up? I didn't want to see him go through puberty and start dating girls.

It was hard enough even thinking about him after what happened between us. No. There was no way it would work. We had to change him back.

“We can’t, Alice. We need him at full strength. And while this age might seem appealing.” I held my hand out to him, my heart leapt when he jumped from Alice’s arms to take my hand. “It wouldn’t be right of us to just leave him this way without his say in it. And, you don’t even know who we are do you, little guy?” In a moment of weakness, I rubbed my nose against his causing him to giggle.

“Why doesn’t he remember anything?” Alice approached us, her face sobering.

“I’m assuming it is because he’s a child again, and at this age, he didn’t know either of us.” I shrugged and then turned my attention back to the child in my arms. “By the way, I’m Kat and this is Alice.”

Chess peered up at us through lowered lashes, suddenly seeming shy as he muttered.

“What?” I arched my ear down to him.

“I said it’s nice to meet you!” he shouted it out, and then covered his mouth, his face turning beet red. “Opps.”

“It’s all right. It’s nice to meet you too... again.” I ended awkwardly and then looked to Alice. “So, any ideas?”

Alice thought about it for a moment, placing a hand on her face as she looked up to the ceiling. “Well...why don’t you ask Seer? She usually seems to know what is going on. Maybe she can help?”

“But she’s all the way in the UnSeelie Court. I really don’t want to drag a child through all that.” I clutched him to me as if to protect him from the horrors of the Underground.

“Why don’t you use that compact that Pat gave you?” she pointed down to my jeans pocket where I had stored the mirror. “Maybe you can speak to her through it?”

I had forgotten about the mirror Pat had given me in his shop. It was supposed to be used in case of an emergency and looking at the child in my arms, I constituted this as a major emergency. Just hopefully it hadn’t gotten broken through all the scuffles we’d been through.

Setting Chess down on the ground, I dug into my pocket until my hand touched the cool metal of the compact and drew it out. Holding it in my hand, I flipped open the cover. I let out the breath I had been holding when I saw the mirror was still intact. Finally some luck!

“Okay, so how do I use it?” I turned it over in my hand, looking for an on switch or some kind of glyphs like there were on the rest of the mirrors in the Underground.

While looking, my finger brushed the surface of the mirror, and a slight ripple of power sent a shock of magic through my hand. Jumping in place, I stared down at the mirror. The reflection had turned into mercury like substance. I thought of Seer, of where she might be. The last place I had seen her was at the door to the Seelie Court, but I doubted she was still there. More than likely she was in the Mushroom City, lounging on one of her beds of fungi with her pipe in her hand. At my thoughts, the mirror swirled about in the compact, its silver like surface morphed into a scene that seemed more like a traveling circus than Seer’s home.

Opalaughts ran across the grass, some the size of Trip and some smaller, I assumed the smaller were children. There were brownies there as well, but the only reason I knew that was because they had the same brown shade of skin as Mop, each with matching black eyes and hair. Among those I recognized were creatures I’d never seen before. Lions with snake tails and wings, what could have very well been a real life unicorn, and then there were...the satyrs.

A shiver ran through me at the sight of the half-goat half-human creatures. While I was happy to see that Romp and Piper were nowhere in sight, just the presence of a satyr caused my stomach to roll. I had not had good experiences with satyrs and had no reason to believe that any of them would be different than the rapist bastards I’d encountered before.

The one creature in the midst of all the Fae that I couldn’t see was Seer. I moved the mirror around the room in my hand, trying to see around the corners of the frame, but it was a useless effort. I could only see as far as the mirror allowed.

“Um...excuse me.” The moment my words came out of my mouth and reached their ears everyone froze. Their heads turned in my direction in slow motion. They blinked their eyes at me before there was a sudden exclamation from the horde, and they ran toward the mirror, all of them talking at once, moving their hands adamantly while trying to explain something to me. What, I hadn’t the faintest.

“Hold on, hold on.” I held my hand up, pulling the mirror back from my face so they could see me better. “One at a time. I can’t understand what you are saying.”

They quieted and one of the brownies, a little woman with a blue dress that matched a hat on top of her head stepped forward. She had bangles on her arms and a thin line of hair along her chin. While she had facial hair, there was no doubt she was female due to the long lashes that surrounded her eyes and rosy lips that she spoke out of.

“Lady, we are so happy to see you.” Her voice was so low and sultry that would rival even one of the High Fae of the Seelie Court.

“I can tell.” I couldn’t help but smile at them before frowning. “What’s going on? Why are there so many of you at Seer’s? And where is Seer?”

“You do not know?” the shock on her face matched those around her. The brownie looked among the other faces as if she thought she had heard me wrong.

“Know what?”

“We have come together to face the darkness as one. When you face the Shadows, we shall be at your disposal should you need us.” She nodded her head along with those around her.

“That’s great and all, and I appreciate the gesture, but I’m not sure there is really anything you can do to help. It’s kind of a solo thing.” I grimaced at the way that came out. I didn’t want to sound full of myself, I would take any help I could get. But the spell had to be said by me, and the blood mine. No one else could help me with that.

“We know that.” She snapped; her eyes filled with annoyance. “But we can lend you our magic in your time of need. After all, it is you who are saving us.”

The grouch in her voice reminded me of a certain brownie that was blatantly missing and I had an idea. “You wouldn’t happen to be Mop’s wife, would you?”

A brilliant smile covered her face. “Why, yes, I am.”

I opened my mouth to ask where Mop was when Alice shoved me aside to look in the mirror. “While this is all very interesting, we are looking for Seer.”

“What are you doing?” I whispered, turning my head toward her.

Keeping her voice low as well, she shot me an impatient frown. “We might have lost the queen and her guards for now but they might be back any minute. We don’t have time for pleasantries.”

She was right. We had a brief reprieve for now, but who knew when my mother would come back, and when she did, if she would even let us

leave? Thinking about that, I didn't think staying here in her bedroom was a good idea anymore.

"Hold on a moment." I held my finger up to the mirror and turned to Alice. "You're right, we can't stay here anymore. Not even to fix Chess." I gestured down to the boy waiting patiently on the floor next to us, his face enthralled by our conversation.

"Then what should we do?" Alice asked.

"You should come here." Our eyes locked back onto the compact where Mop's wife was still talking. "Then you can find the Seer yourself and get all the answers you need."

Sounded like a good idea to me. The only problem was getting there. The mirror to the Bandersnatch was the only mirror I had seen in the whole room, and I hadn't really been paying much attention to where we were going on our way here. I had no idea if there were any mirrors close by that could be used to go to the UnSeelie Court.

Turning to Alice, I asked, "Any idea how to get out of here?"

"Oh, plenty," she answered. "But we'll have to hurry. All the mirrors I saw were wide out in the open, and I have no clue how to tell which one would take us where we want to go." She fluffed her skirt around her and seemed to think on it.

Pulling my attention back to the mirror, I said, "We'll figure it out. Just tell Seer we are coming. We have a little..." My gaze fell on the top of Chess' small head. "...problem we need her assistance with."

"No worries. I will deliver the message verbatim. Just get yourselves here and safe." She gave a short downward jerk of her head and then the mirror went blank.

I tucked the mirror into my pocket and then held my arms out to Chess. "Come on, little one, we've got to get going."

Not even hesitating, he climbed into my arms. Giving Alice a look that asked if she was ready, we moved to the door. I turned the knob, and slowly creaked the door open. My eyes peeked into the hallway.

"Do you see anyone?" Alice asked behind me as Chess' small voice asked, "Where are we going?"

"No, I don't." I answered and then to Chess, "We are going to make you big again, and to do that we have to get some help."

"Big again? But I'm already big!" he held his arms out to show me just how big he was. Smiling at him, I rubbed my nose against his once more,

getting me a giggle in response before I pushed the door the rest of the way open and stepped out into the hallway.

Turning to Alice, I gestured for her to lead. "After you."

Following me into the hall, she looked both ways, her face creased in concentration. After a moment, she pointed a hand down the right side. "I believe the mirror I saw is this way."

Letting her take the lead, we hurried down the hallway; the only sound was our feet hitting the marble floor. My arms began to ache from holding Chess but putting him down wasn't an option. We needed speed and from prior experience, children were slow and easily distracted. I was lucky he had cooperated so easily so far.

Alice came to an abrupt stop that caused me to trip over my own feet and almost made me drop Chess in the process. Shooting her a glare, I wasted no time going to the mirror's frame. Reaching my hand up to activate it, Chess' voice stopped me.

"Can I do it?" his large green eyes were intently focused on the glyphs along the mirror's frame. His eyes sparkled with an eagerness I had only seen in his older self's eyes.

"Sure you can." I grabbed his hand in mine and led it up to the frame. When he was close enough to it, I let him go, watching to see if he would know what to do.

I shouldn't have worried; he slid his hand along the frame as if he had done it a hundred times before. The frame lit up and the surface swelled activating the portal.

"Good job." I gave him a little squeeze and then exchanged a look with Alice, who nodded in response.

I didn't know where this mirror went but anywhere was better than in the middle of the Seelie Palace. What was that saying again? Beggars can't be choosers? Well in this moment, I was a beggar, but I still didn't want to end up as deep in more trouble than we were already in. I was running out of patience. When that happened I got stupid, and when I got stupid, that meant things were going to get messy and fast.



Chapter 12

UnSeelie Court

IT WAS ASKING too much to come out anywhere near the Seer's home. Tall green hedges surrounded us as we stepped out of the mirror and onto the greyish cobblestone of the UnSeelie Queen's garden.

Mab, the UnSeelie Queen and my ex-fiancé's mother, was not how many people would portray her. In stories she was the evil queen who would crush your heart in a moment of boredom. When in reality, she was just an over passionate woman who loved her son dearly. Seeing as I broke her son's heart, and was the reason he had been taken from her, I was probably the last person she wanted to see.

I sat Chess on the ground and took his small hand in mine. I had only been here once before, and I didn't know if there were flesh eating plants who'd love to take a chunk out of a cute kid like him. Not that he was in any hurry to go it on his own.

He clung to my hand like I would disappear at any moment. His eyes were round and so full of fear that it made me hurt inside. From what I'd heard from Chess, this hadn't been a good age for him, and I couldn't imagine what he had already experienced at such a tender age. The Bandersnatch probably hadn't helped any either.

"Where are we?" Alice asked, stepping out of the mirror, her head swiveling around.

"No place good." I took a cautious step forward, bringing Chess with me to peer around one of the hedges. The last time I had been here there had been singing, but the lack of singing this time didn't make me any less wary of running into the queen.

From where we stood it seemed like we had come into the garden from the opposite side than last time. The fountain with the statue of a tree and three people, a man and two women, was on the opposite side of the clearing. This side of the clearing had small shrubs lining the outside. On the inside I could see where I had met Mab once before, when I thought I was just a human with Fae ancestors, and not the Seelie Princess.

I waved at Alice over my shoulder as I directed Chess into the garden. "Come on."

I sort of tip toed down the stone path, my eyes darting left and right. It wouldn't help to be caught unaware in somewhere I was in no way supposed to be. Why they even had a mirror near the garden was strange. Did she make unexpected calls? And if so, why would she do it out in the open where anyone could hear her?

"I don't like this," Alice whispered behind me. I couldn't disagree. It was too quiet. Usually, there were birds or some kind of background noise, but even the fountain wasn't running. Where was everyone?

"Me either. Let's just get out of here." We came around the bushes and entered the main part of the garden. From here I could see where I had met up with Mab before, but what I saw there made me stop in place.

The roses. The white roses that Dorian had planted for me when we got engaged that had later bled red, were dying. The vibrant color of the petals was brown and sagging. The branches and leaves were black as if someone had taken a lighter to them.

"Pitiful, isn't it?"

My spine stiffened at the sound of the UnSeelie Queen's voice. Dark and sensual with a slightly sharp edge to it. She had always had a great phone sex voice. But hearing it now just made my skin crawl.

"What happened?" I didn't turn away from the roses, but I did draw Chess in front of me so he wasn't in her line of sight.

"You don't know?" I could sense her presence as she soundlessly made her way across the garden. She stopped beside us, her black dress brushing against my legs. Just that simple touch made me want to run away from her screaming. She hadn't offered violence, yet, but the thick tension in the air said that it was only a matter of time before it came up.

"Why would I?" I shifted my weight until I was turned toward her.

Like my mother, she had a sense of style that had become expected of her. Dark dresses that clung to her figure but also billowed out around her like a spider web seeking its meal. Where my mother was light and cold, Mab was the night and all that came with it. She offered passion and darkness, a place to be you without judgment. The Seelie Court was supposed to be about honesty and chivalry, but my mother had corrupted what it really meant to be the Seelie Queen. I could only hope one day they would be put back on the right path, even if I wasn't there to see it.

“You seem to know so much already, I would expect the savior to know when she was destroying one’s life.” She said the words like she was complimenting me on my hair.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen. I didn’t force him to join the Shadows because I broke up with him. He did that all on his own.” I took a half step toward her but stopped and sighed. I didn’t owe her an explanation, and she wouldn’t accept it even if I gave her one.

“It wasn’t my fault. I didn’t know what would happen,” she mimicked my words back to me an edge of anger coloring her voice. “It seems to me, dear, that you never take any of the blame on yourself and expect others to just deal with it.”

I opened my mouth to protest but closed it. Arguing was going to get me nowhere. She was determined to hate me, and there was nothing I could say or do short of turning back time that would change it. Instead, I turned away from her without a word, pushing Chess in front of me.

“Leaving so soon?” Her voice called out to me, I ignored it and kept walking until she said, “But what of our dear Cheshire, do you not wish to return him to his true form?”

Stopping once more, I took in a deep breath before exhaling as I turned back. “And what would you know of it?”

The smile that tipped her lips was one that said she knew she had something we wanted, but we weren’t going to get it from her without paying for it first. It also meant that if I wanted her help nothing short of begging would suffice. And I didn’t beg. Not for anyone or anything.

When she didn’t answer immediately, I half spun on my heel before her voice stopped me again, “What would you give to save him?”

“What do you mean?” Suspicion began to creep into my mind.

“I mean exactly what I said. What would you give?” She moved across the cobblestone as if floating, a trait she had passed down to her son no doubt. Her dress moved around her like an extension of herself, gliding and shifting as if it were a breathing, living, being.

Mab stopped a mere foot away, causing Alice, who had had the good sense to keep quiet, to shift until she was behind me. I pressed Chess closer to me until he let go of my hand and took his place wrapped around my leg, his tail playing along the side of my jeans.

“Almost anything.” I wasn’t an all or nothing kind of girl, there were just some things you couldn’t give and saying anything might have opened

me up to all kinds of sadistic things I couldn't even think of.

"Almost anything?" her brows rose in surprise. "I would think you would give anything for the creature who stole your love from my son." Her eyes zeroed in on Chess, and the look wasn't kind.

"Chess didn't steal anything, I gave it freely. Your son couldn't accept me for what I am," I stated between clenched teeth.

"And what are you? Fae? Human? Savior? You aren't exactly one or the other, are you?" her voice was condescending and full of exasperation. "It seems you are somehow stuck in the middle of something you have no right to be in. The role you play isn't even yours, is it?" This time her eyes and voice were all for Chess, sending some kind of secret message that I couldn't decipher.

"Enough of your games, do you know how to fix Chess or not?" I growled, drawing her attention back to me.

"It's not a matter of fixing him." Her long, blood red nails reached down to Chess, who cringed from her touch and clung to me tighter.

"Then what is it?" Alice spoke up from behind me, causing Mab's gaze to harden.

"Do not speak to me, pretender!" she hissed her words, her face contorting into a menacing snarl, and for a moment, I thought she might lash out at her before her face calmed and she returned to her normal cool self. She glanced down at Chess once more, this time, the smile on her face was more curious than evil. "The Bandersnatch is not a forgiving creature."

"So we've noticed." My lips twisted into a frown.

"What they took was not just sin but magic. Dreams." Her eyes lit up with a hunger I had only seen on a few Faes' faces, and none of those meetings had ended well.

"Okay," I drew out, my patience growing thin. "Then how do we make him, you know, big again? Put the magic back?"

"Exactly." She knelt on the ground, her skirts smoothing underneath her on their own. Mab reached out but did not touch Chess, her hand sort of just hovered an inch away from his face. "Much magic has been removed, and it will take just as much to put it back."

"But how do we put it back? We can't just go back to the Bandersnatch and ask 'could you kindly give Chess' magic back, please?' Might as well ask them to destroy the Shadows while we are at it." I snorted, placing a hand on one hip and cocking it to the side.

“Do not get smart with me, child.” Mab stood abruptly, getting so close to my face, I dropped my arm and stepped back. “You have been lucky so far to have found help when needed, but one day your luck will run out.” She snapped her fingers in front of my face with a growl. “And all that you once held dear will be snuffed out, and there will be nothing you can do to stop it.”

I had a feeling we weren’t talking about me anymore, and it made me pity her. She had not lost her son once but twice in a short amount of time. Well, short in Fae years. And the person responsible for her misery was standing right in front of her, and she couldn’t do anything to avenge her son in fear of the Shadows destroying everything. It was a sad day when your only hope was also the one you despised above all others.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, apologizing for more than just my attitude. “Please continue.”

Her face became living marble, her eyes the only thing showing life as she began to speak, “As it so happens, you are correct. You cannot request the magic be returned but you can replace it.” I opened my mouth to ask how but she beat me to it, “With someone else’s magic.”

Someone else’s magic? I placed a hand on top of Chess’ head, smoothing the hair between his ears as they twitched at my touch. “How?”

At that one word it was like a light switch had been thrown and her face was alive once more. A smile spread across her face so wide that I feared it would rip her head in half. The Joker had nothing on this woman.

When her hand reached up and cupped my cheek in her hand, I forced myself not to flinch, not to cower back. She leaned in close until our lips were only a hairs breath away from each other. I almost thought she would kiss me but instead, she said, “By giving yours up in return.”

I jerked back from her, and my feet stumbled beneath me, causing Chess to release me or be thrown to the ground. Thankfully, he chose the former and it was only me that landed on my backside glaring up at a smirking Mab.

“I can’t just give up my magic to save him.” I shook my head, sadness filling my face. “Not if I’m to save everyone else.”

Mab gave an elegant shrug. “You do not have to give up all of your magic. Just enough to return him to his rightful size, but...” her words trailed off, her eyes sliding away to the side.

“But what?” I crawled to my knees, my hands stinging where they had skidded against the stone.

“The exchange of one’s magic is a serious thing. It cannot be taken lightly, and those who do it will be bound forever. Your heart will be linked to his, your magic as one. If one of you dies the other will feel it for the rest of their life. Like a wound that will never heal. Could you handle that?”

Could I? I loved him, yes, but could I give up a part of myself to someone who might or might not love me in return? I gulped and met Chess’ sparkling green eyes that were so full of innocence and fear. I couldn’t leave him like this. Not if I could help him.

“Yes,” I gasped out, my heart in my throat, “I can.”

“Wonderful.” She clapped her hands together, her nails clicking as they touched. “Now, as you may recall, on your first trip to the Underground...” she gestured to me in disdain. “You had the misfortune to ingest too much faerie wine.”

“I remember, and your son did something to draw it out.” I felt my face heat as I remembered. I had been so nervous on my first trip to the Seelie Court and Gab had been asking so many personal questions I had gotten a little carried away with the drink they were serving. I didn’t know it was faerie wine, or what it could do to a human, but Dorian knew.

When Dorian found me I was ready to run off with Bastian and blow my cover. Instead, I found myself out on the balcony thinking I was about to get kissed when in reality he drew the faerie magic out of me and into himself. I remembered the sparkling blue as it floated out of my mouth and into his.

“Yes, he did.” She nodded her head, the first sign of approval showing since I had appeared. “You will do something similar to our dear Moderator but in reverse.”

“How do I do that?” I watched Chess as I asked my question, giving him a weak smile so he wouldn’t be afraid.

“Just will it to be so and it will be.” She waved her hand in an elaborate circle as if her words answered everything.

Frowning at her explanation, I crawled over to Chess on my knees. He watched my movements with adoration in his eyes. He trusted me so explicitly it made my insides ache. In a few short moments, the only emotion he would feel for me would be indifference.

“What’s going on?” his small voice asked as I placed my hands on the sides of his face.

I shushed him, bringing my forehead to lean against his. “Don’t worry, I won’t let anything bad happen to you. We are just going to make you all better again.”

“Will it hurt?”

Shaking my head, I smiled gently. “No, not at all. Can you close your eyes for me?” I leaned back away from him as he nodded and closed his eyes.

I placed my thumbs on his jaw and pressed down, urging him to open his mouth. My magic swirled and burned inside me as I drew it to life. I had never done something like this before. Growing plant life and animating vegetables was one thing, but passing my magic to someone else without the intention of hurting them? I just hoped I didn’t kill us both.

The magic sizzled and fizzed as it crawled out of my stomach and up my throat. I forced myself not to swallow as it tickled my larynx. As it built up in my mouth, I opened my lips, pressing my mouth close to his. The magic left me as easy as breathing, and as I took another breath and let it out, more passed from me to him.

I couldn’t tell the affects right away, but the more energy that passed from my lips and into his, the older his face became, and the more light-headed I felt. The baby fat to his face shrunk, turning into a more defined jawline and cheekbones. His chest and shoulders expanded, the rest of his body following, causing me to arch up to reach his face from my place on the ground.

I knew the moment he was himself again. I felt it in my heart. Like a light switch had been flipped and everything in the world made sense again. His eyes flipped open, his emerald eyes wide with shock and horror. At me or at himself I wasn’t sure, and at that moment, it took all I had to keep my hands on his face, and even that was failing.

Eventually, it was Chess who stopped me. He pulled my hands from him, closing his mouth so I couldn’t breathe any more magic into him, and drew me to his chest as I had done in the Bandersnatch.

“Oh, kitten. What have you done?” he asked. I gave him a weak smile before my eyelids fluttered closed, and there was nothing but the sound of his heart beating in time with mine.



Chapter 13

Of One Heart

WHEN I AWOKE I was no longer in Mab's garden but staring up at a wooden roof. Every inch of me screamed, from the balls of my feet to the hairs on top of my head. Even breathing hurt.

What the hell happened? Chess. I was giving some of my magic to Chess and then I passed out. God, I felt horrible. I so was not doing that ever again.

I lifted a hand to my head as I inched up from whoever's bed I was laying in. Each movement was like tiny needles were being shoved into my nerve endings. This wasn't like being hung over from using too much power, this was like I got hit by a Mac truck and had been in a coma for the last six months. The kind of pain that made you just want to curl into a ball and die.

I tried to ignore the pain and figure out where exactly I was, and where the hell everyone else was? Achingly slow, I turned my head from the ceiling to take in the small bedroom I was currently residing in. The bed was only big enough to fit two people comfortably. The comforter that had been thrown over me was patched in multicolored cloth. The rest of the room wasn't much different.

A nightstand made of the same kind of wood as the ceiling sat next to the bed; it wasn't the usual shape you would expect to see a nightstand. It curved and twisted like it couldn't decide what shape to take. The three-drawer dresser on the other side of the small room wasn't any different. How they got their clothes in there was beyond me.

There was only one door that was left ajar, letting in low voices that I couldn't decipher. I tried to move into a sitting position once more and cried out at the effort. My pained cry must have been heard from the other room, because the voices halted and a rush of footsteps came my way.

The half open door was thrown open and in the doorway stood Chess. He was no longer a child and the rags he had been wearing had been replaced with a pale lavender tunic that laced at the neck. His pants were a darker shade lavender and looked like they were made of some kind of felt.

To top it all off, they were tucked into knee-high boots that blended in with the fabric.

The moment I saw him my breathing became easier, and my pain didn't matter as much anymore. Was this what Mab had meant? Would we have to be around each other to ever feel normal? If so, it would make using the bathroom a very interesting venture.

"How are you feeling, pet?" Chess knelt by the bed, Alice and Hatter bringing up the rear; worry etching all of their faces.

The décor finally made sense. We were in Hatter's house. Though, how we got here was still a mystery.

I had only met Hatter once, at the Seelie Court. There he had been a sore thumb sticking out in the midst of a room of golden hornets. Here in his own home, he seemed more relaxed and less likely to throw up at any moment.

His head was noticeably bare, no doubt because we were inside. His silver hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail that trailed over his shoulder and brushed the base of his multicolored vest that lay on top of a magenta dress shirt. His pants were a dark emerald green and his shoes a bicolored red and blue. Overall, he should have looked ridiculous, but he didn't, and by the way Alice was sneaking glances at him she didn't think so either.

Turning my attention back to Chess, I tried to speak and then coughed at the dryness in my throat. Alice produced a cup from somewhere and handed it to Chess who in turn held it up to my lips. Usually, I would have made some kind of smart remark about not being a child but my arms still felt like they weighed a hundred pounds.

Thankfully, only water was in the cup, but part of me wouldn't have refused something stronger. Not Hatter's tea strong, but a shot of vodka wouldn't have been unwelcome.

All eyes focused on me as I finished my drink and cleared my throat. "What happened?" My words came out in a sort of croak that sounded like I smoked ten packs a day.

"You fainted, of course," Alice answered. "You know, if you keep this up they are going to start calling you the fainter rather than the savior." I glared at her but from the twinkle in her eye could tell she was just kidding. Not that she was wrong. I seemed to be doing quite a lot of fainting nowadays. Chalk it up to the unusually high amount of magic I was emitting lately.

A shock ran up my arm, jerking my attention from Alice to my hand where Chess had placed his on top of mine. That was interesting. It was like a sort of buzzing along the underside of my skin. Not exactly an unpleasant feeling but different to be sure.

My eyes rose from our joined hands to meet his. Unlike Alice, who seemed to be trying to make light of the situation, which was usually Chess' job, his eyes were full of worry, but also underneath it was a need. The same need that was beginning to build in me.

"I'm fine," I finally said, causing some of his worry to fall away, but the hunger was still there and with Alice and Hatter in the room it was making me uncomfortable.

Hatter, who up until this point had been a silent observer, made an awkward noise in his throat. "Alice dear, let's give them some privacy."

Alice let Hatter lead her out of the room, and the moment the door clicked shut, Chess' mouth was on mine. Still partly in pain, I made a small sound in the back of my throat but didn't push him away. It was like coming home: the feel of his upper body pressed against mine, his lips moving across my own, and the taste of him as he caressed my tongue. It hadn't been like this before. The overwhelming need to be as close to him as possible, to crawl inside of him if I could.

I had always been attracted to Chess. From the moment he unwrapped himself from his vine-covered throne, a part of me wanted him. It took a while for me to finally admit that I wanted him more than just physically, and when we finally came together, it had been explosive and wonderful. Until that is, it wasn't. That thought, had me pushing him away even though my very being screamed at me for it.

"Wait. Stop," I said between closed mouth kisses, my hands still twisting in the fabric of his shirt. His response was to trail his mouth down the side of my neck, a low growl rumbling from his chest. The sound shot straight between my thighs.

My insides melted as his mouth found that spot between my neck and shoulder that made me groan. He climbed up on the bed and pressed me back down onto the mattress. With the cover between us, we couldn't get the friction we needed. There needed to be more touching, more skin.

"What's wrong with us?" Chess' voice against the side of my neck caused a shiver to run through me and was just enough to give me the strength to push him away and slip out of the bed.

I kept my back to him, because the sight of him on the bed rumped and ready would make me want to dive back in. I felt my face heat at my lack of self-control. I was pretty sure I knew the answer to his question, but I had never thought it would cause such a reaction.

“The queen warned me something like this would happen.” I cleared my throat, trying to sound more normal and not so wanton. “Well, not this exactly, but she said we would be more connected.”

“I don’t understand.” I heard him move from the bed, and I tensed as his body stood just behind me. Not touching, just there. “Why would you save me?” I felt his hands reach up and almost touch my arms before he dropped them again.

“I couldn’t just leave you like that.”

“But you could have. After the way I treated you, I didn’t deserve anything less.” His voice was low and broken as if he thought he really deserved being put in the Bandersnatch.

“No, you didn’t.” I shook my head, not turning to look at him for fear of what I would do. “If I punished every guy who’d ever been an asshole to me there’d be no men left.” I gave a small laugh but my heart wasn’t in it.

“Kat.” This time when his hands reached up they did touch me, and the feel of his skin against mine, just his hands pressed against my arms, almost blew my hard won control.

“Don’t.” My voice broke with that one word and my eyes burned. I wouldn’t cry damn it. How can my body and soul crave his touch and my heart break at the same time? It wasn’t fair.

“Kitten.”

I shrugged, causing his hands to fall off my arms. Turning around with a laugh, I gave him a sad smile. “You can’t help who you love and who you don’t.” I took a deep breath, dragging myself away from him while mentally building a wall between us.

“So, what it seems like to me is that the exchange of magic has a bit more to it than what I’d thought.” I stared at the nightstand pretending like he wasn’t in the room at all. “The side effects are more intense, not only making us want to be near each other, but the need to touch one another is almost overwhelming. The only way I see this working without both of us going insane is to just go about our lives as normal, I mean after the Shadows are beaten. You can go back to doing whatever you did before, and we can just pretend like this never happened and hope the affects fade

after time.” Even as I said the words, I hated it. I didn’t want to pretend we never happened, but I couldn’t pretend like I didn’t love him or watch as he paraded around with more of his playthings.

“Do you really think that will work?” my gaze jerked away from the nightstand at the anger in his voice. “While you were out, it was killing me not to be by your side while you slept. Hatter had to give me some tea just so I would stop running a hole in his floor.” He took a step toward me, his tail whipping behind him in a rigid path. “We are like two sides of a magnet. We are drawn to each other and no amount of lying to ourselves will stop that.”

The feral look he gave me made things clench so tightly below that I gasped. His smell, his presence, all of it was like I was a drug addict and my drug of choice was zeroing in on me, leaving me with no place to go.

“I can’t do this,” I muttered more to myself than Chess, who had stopped in front of me. “Please.”

His hands reached up to stroke the sides of my face while his tail wrapped around my leg pulling me into him. The moment my hands touched his again, I knew I was lost. His mouth ghosted across my forehead, creating a path down my face and across each cheek. My eyes fluttered shut as his lips brushed across my eyelids. When he finally reached my mouth, my resolve had weakened so completely that I wasn’t strong enough to tell myself, no, to tell him to stop, but I was strong enough to find out exactly what I was getting into.

“This is just sex, right? Just sex.” It was more of a reassurance to me than a question, but it was Chess’ response that undid me.

“It will never be just sex, Kat.” My chest warmed at the surety of his words and the analytical side of me wanted to know exactly what he meant, but in that moment, he picked me up by the back of my legs and pressed our bodies together. All thoughts were lost and the only thing that mattered was him.

My legs wrapped around his waist and my mouth sought out his until we were melded together as close as possible with our clothing still on. I slipped my tongue between his lips, sliding it back and forth between his sharpened canines.

There was a certain way you had to kiss someone who had fangs; otherwise you would cut the crap out of your tongue every time you kissed. My mind might be clouded with lust, my body overtaken by the magic that

drew us to each other, but I wasn't so far gone that I couldn't remember not to slice myself up. Chess, on the other hand, didn't seem to care about getting hurt. He attacked my mouth like he was searching for the Holy Grail and the only place he would find it would be in the back of my throat.

Trying to move things along, I pulled on his shirt until he let go of my mouth long enough to bring me over to the bed. My back hit the mattress, and I had a brief moment where I wondered if Alice and Hatter had done it on here before Chess was back before me sans any clothes. My mind didn't have a chance to comprehend the gorgeous sight of a naked Chess before he was pulling at my clothing.

My clothing came off and then it was a sort of blur. Skin pressed against skin, leaving a trail of heat with every touch. Then he was inside me, stretching me, filling me, and a sense of absolute completion overcame me. My gaze locked onto his and I knew I wasn't the only one feeling it.

Growls and moans built up as we moved together, so loud that if I had been in my right mind it would have made me worried about Hatter and Alice hearing. But the more we touched each other, the more my magic seemed to come alive, and the glow that had shown up the last time we had been together was almost blinding as we reached our peak.

Afterward, when we had come back down and we separated the urge to be with him wasn't so intense. I had time to think about what we had done and what it meant. Panic rose in me. My pulse thudded so hard beneath the surface that it hurt, and I was about to bolt, but Chess' arm wrapped around me.

"I can taste your fear, like a heavy bitter tang on my tongue." His clawed hand stroked my arm in a soothing motion. He let a purr vibrate out of his chest and all the tension in me seemed to relax. "Better?"

"Yes." I turned slightly to him until I could see his eyes. A languid, satisfied expression covered his face and I hated to destroy it with what I had to say. "It feels different now, doesn't it? Like I still want to be near you, but I don't feel like I'm going to die if I don't."

He leaned up onto his elbow and his hand brushed through my hair along the side of my face, a small smile on his lips. "I know what you mean. Maybe it will always be this way?"

"Like what?" I pulled back until his hand dropped away. "We stay away from each other for as long as possible until the need to be near each

other builds up again, then we fuck like bunnies before going back to our normal lives?”

His lips curled down and he sighed. The sound of it was irritated even to me. “No, Katherine, we will not just fuck and then go away.” His hand grasped the side of my hip and pulled me to him in almost a violent motion. I put my hands up to keep us from being flush against each other. I needed some distance, even though the pull between us had lessened.

“Then what do you suggest?” Heat bubbled in my stomach and it had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with rage.

“You weren’t even listening before, were you?” his anger answered mine but his held such a ferocity that it made my palms sweat and my pulse race. “Must I spell it out for your delicate human ears for you to understand that I love you?”

I blinked. Once. Twice. Three times before I shook my head and asked, “You love me?”

His anger seemed to dissipate at my question and his expression softened. “Yes, silly girl. I do.”

“Then why did you...” I started.

“Say what I did?”

“Yeah.” I nodded, my eyes going down to stare at his chest. I didn’t have the courage to look him in the eyes as he answered.

“The prince.”

“What about him?” I frowned harder but my gaze finally rose to meet his. “You’re not afraid of him, are you?”

“Not of him per say, but what he might do to you. On his own our dark prince can be as vicious and as unforgiving as the Bandersnatch, but when he had the chance to get the love of his life back, he had mellowed out some. If I had pronounced anything other than friendship with you, making him believe he didn’t have a chance anymore, there was no telling what he would do.”

“You mean like join the Shadows?”

“Exactly.” He tapped my nose with his finger and I wrinkled it at the touch. “But dear Alice has brought me up to speed, and it seems like my charade was all for not.” He sat up in the bed with a distraught sigh.

I grabbed his arm and pressed my naked flesh against him. “It wasn’t for nothing, we’re together now. So, no more secrets, right?” My hand slid beneath the covers and played along the inside of his thigh.

Chess took me in his arms with a playful grin. “No more secrets.”

He captured my mouth in his as he eased us back down to the bed. Desire curled in me as he slithered between my thighs and brought my legs up around his waist. But before he could slide home, a knock on the door followed by Hatter’s voice interrupted us, “If you two are quite finished, I would like my bedroom back now.”



Chapter 14

Searching

MY FACE COULDN'T get any redder as I stood before Hatter and Alice with Chess at my side. If he was fazed it didn't show, but the knowing smile on Alice's face was unsettling, and I knew I would be hearing it from her for weeks to come.

"Now that we are all here, back on our feet, and back to the right size." Alice gave me a sly grin before continuing, "We need to discuss what we are going to do next. Hatter here has kindly offered us his home as a base of operations." She clasped hands with the serious Fae, and they exchanged a look that made me wonder what they had been doing while Chess and I were busy. We would definitely be having a talk before all this was over. If I was still here that is.

"Well, we need to find the Shadows for one," Chess said, his tail wrapping around my leg. The urge to touch each other was still there and having that small connection was enough to calm it.

I shook my head at him, my want to be near him not overshadowing my own good sense. "There is no point in finding them if we don't know the ritual to get rid of them. And we left my mother's before we had a chance to ask her."

"We had a good reason, though," Alice argued, gracing Chess with a pointed look. "We couldn't have asked her while Cheshire was in such a vulnerable state. Who knows what the queen might have asked for in return?"

"She won't be getting anything in return." I shifted my weight to one side, cocking my hip out, my hands becoming aggressive as I spoke, "She made this mess and I'm cleaning it up. The least she could do is not be a pain in the ass while I save her sorry hide." I swore if my mother even thought about trying to make a deal with me to get the words to the ritual all bets were off. There wouldn't be enough of her left to rule the Seelie Court let alone survive.

"Now, pet." Chess placed a hand on my arm, his hand on my skin calming some of my anger. "We can't just kill the queen because she is

being nasty. No matter how warranted.”

I frowned at him. I didn’t want to be calm, I wanted to be angry, and his touch was projecting his emotions onto me. I could tell this whole feeling what I’m feeling thing was going to get annoying fast.

“Plus you promised not to, remember?” I turned my frown toward Alice. I had promised that, hadn’t I? Damn it all to hell and back.

“Fine. No maiming of the queen. Happy?” I glanced around the room and then sighed. “But that doesn’t change the fact that we still need the words to the ritual to get rid of them, and we aren’t going to get those here.” I paused for a moment and then remembered the compact Pat had given me. I would think that someone who was used to using a cell phone would remember something so similar in their pocket. My hand reached into my pocket only to come up empty.

I looked to Alice, confusion on my face. “What happened to the mirror Pat gave me?”

This time it was Alice’s turn to frown. Sadness filled her eyes as she held out her hand to show me the compact and all of its pieces in her hand. The mirror had been smashed, the hinge that combined the top and bottom pulled apart.

“It fell out of your pocket when you collapsed. We tried to magic it back together, but it seems to need a different sort of touch.” She glanced at Hatter for support. “Maybe Pat could still fix it? Or make a new one?”

“We don’t have time to go all the way back to Pat’s, we need to contact my mother now.” I turned to Hatter, impatience starting to color my words. “Don’t you have a mirror here?”

He shook his head, his silver hair shaking back and forth. “Not one that can be used as a portal, or even as a communication device. I do not wish to deal with the Higher Fae any more than I have to.” His mouth twisted into a grimace.

“Well, there goes that idea,” I groaned.

“We could just go to my house.” Chess stepped forward. His tail released my leg and I instantly missed the touch. He glanced back at me with a knowing smile that made me blush before he flicked his hair over his shoulder and shrugged. “If it’s still there, that is. I haven’t been there in a while, who knows what has happened since I’ve been gone.”

“It’s worth a shot either way. We don’t have anywhere else to go, and your place is closer than Seer’s.” I gave a half shrug, not really happy with

the plan, but there wasn't much else we could do. We couldn't run back and forth between the realms, not without eventually running into the Shadows, and talking to my mother via mirror was safer than seeing her in person. Either way, we weren't going to get anywhere hanging around Hatter's house.



THE TRIP FROM HATTER'S to Chess' was a lot less scary with another Fae besides Mop and Trip by my side. We had decided it was best for Alice to stay with Hatter. Well, I decided that, because she seemed to want to so badly, and I didn't have the heart to tell her no. Besides, what could she do anyways? Glamour the Shadows to death?

The walk was quiet and peaceful. If we hadn't been in the middle of a war, I'd have said it was almost like a date. Two people strolling through the woods, their hands brushing every once in a while as they snuck secret looks at each other. It was kind of fun, that was until we reached the Willow Tree.

I could tell right away something was wrong. The leaves of the tree were dried up, and most of them had fallen to the ground. There was no movement in the tree when we approached. The vines stayed where they were instead of sweeping open like a curtain to welcome us in, and the inside wasn't any better.

The green grass that almost glowed with different colored mushrooms was brown and patchy, with no fungi in sight. The trail that led up to Chess' throne was all but nonexistent, and what was worse than the decay around us, was the figure sitting in Chess' spot.

"What do we have here?" Dorian sat on the throne, one leg thrown over the side almost exactly the same way Chess' had been the first time we met. Except, Chess didn't have a grin on his face so malevolent that it sent chills down my spine.

He still looked like Dorian, black clothing on top of black boots. His dark hair braided in small areas. Even the blue of his eyes was the same. To any onlooker, they would think there was nothing wrong with him, but it was his aura. His very presence was different.

The further he came into the light, the more I felt it press down on me. He wasn't even trying, and the darkness in him was leaking all over the

place. How had he gotten so much power so fast? Surely the Shadows couldn't be powerful enough to make him feel this way. That's when I realized it.

They didn't give him anything. He hadn't joined their side; he had become their side. That grin on his face wasn't one that Dorian would have ever worn, but the Shadow man would. That sort of 'I'm thinking about what you look like on the side' kind of gaze that made my skin buzz with energy.

Chess' need to protect me billowed up inside me, and it almost made me smile, but I held it back not wanting to give Dorian any ammunition to use against us.

"What do you want?" I stepped forward, not giving Chess the chance to stand between us, one more moment and he would have done just that.

The laugh that came out of Dorian was not his laugh. It burned along my skin like an icy chill. There was so much power; so much evil in that laugh, it made my determination die a little bit. How was I supposed to win? I wasn't strong enough.

A warm hand slipped into mine and my head cleared. The hopelessness I was feeling disappeared, and I gave Chess a thankful smile. That had been the wrong thing to do, because not soon after, Dorian let out a roar that shook the ground.

"No!" he yelled, gripping his hair in his hands. "You promised me they wouldn't be together. That she would be mine!" His face jerked to the side and then the other like he was fighting some kind of internal battle before all of a sudden he stopped, and his wicked grin fell back into place.

"Tell me, my love." The endearment on his lips was like a worm crawling along my skin, and I fought not to rub my arms to be rid of it. "Has our dear Cheshire told you why he has been beaten and offered up to Fae of all kinds for his playmates?"

My brow scrunched down, what was he getting at? "Because he's a half-breed and the moderator."

Dorian shook a finger at us, making a tut-tutting noise with his tongue. "Someone's been telling tall tales. Get it?" his eyes lit up with laughter. "Tails? Because he's a cat!"

"Get to the fucking point, Dorian." I snarled, not liking where he was going with this conversation, I could already feel the unease in Chess, and it didn't sit well.

His laughter didn't die off; it just stopped, all at once. In the place of laughter was a nasty grin. "Let me tell you a story, shall I?" he didn't wait for anyone to answer. He crossed one leg over the other he floated in the air before us. "Once upon a time, a scared queen wanted to get rid of all the bad little Fae who were terrorizing her kingdom. So, instead of doing the civil thing and putting them out of their misery, she decided to put them in a place no one would miss them. The Shadow Realm."

"We know all this already, you are trying my patience," I said through clenched teeth, my hand tightening around Chess'.

"Now, now do not get so huffy." He waved me off as if I were a fly buzzing around his head, and then his lip poked out in a pout. "We are just now getting to the best part."

"You aren't telling us anything new." Chess growled his apprehension to leave making me sick to my stomach.

"No." my voice made Chess quickly look to me. "I want to know what he has to say."

"Why? He's just going to lie and twist things to how he wants them." He gestured toward Dorian, who was sitting patiently in midair, happy as a peach to see us fight.

I didn't tell him I could feel his terror, he knew I could. But I also wanted to know what he had been so desperate to keep from me after we had promised no more secrets. I wasn't sure Chess would tell me the truth if I asked now.

"Go on, then." I gestured my head toward Dorian, urging him to continue. "Tell me what you want me to hear, so you can get out of my face."

"Very well, I will get it over with." Suddenly, his glee was replaced with anger. "The reason your dear ol' Cheshire was tortured and pimped out was because your mother was trying to get the last ingredient for her little spell."

"Ingredient?" I asked the question, though I knew what he was talking about. She had told me before I wasn't ready to do the spell, and when she took Chess, she had left a note telling me *now* I was ready, but then I didn't know what she meant. The combination of Chess' mumbled words about hearts and ploy to marry me off to Dorian to produce a half-breed led to only one conclusion. Standing in front of Dorian with an apprehensive Chess at my side, I knew all too well what that last ingredient was.

“Love,” I said quietly, I dropped Chess’ hand at the realization. “The last ingredient is love.”

“Correct!” Dorian clapped his hands together sharply. “And who do you think was in charge of getting that last ingredient once the queen found out who you were?”

I stared at the ground hard not wanting to look to the side and see the guilt on Chess’ face. I could feel it well enough, like a sickness building in my soul. It had been a game all along. I had been a fool to believe him after he had denied me the first time. Why did I think a little magical exchange mixed with some mind-blowing sex would make him love me?

“No more secrets, huh?” I scoffed and jerked away when he reached out to touch me. I didn’t want to calm down. I didn’t want him anywhere near me.

“You have to understand. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to hurt you,” Chess pleaded with me, his eyes large and full of sorrow.

“But he did hurt you, didn’t he?” Dorian pranced between us, a smile lighting up his face. He was delighted to have caused our pain and was trying his best to rub our faces in it. I was about ready to rub his face in something else.

“I don’t know if I can do this anymore.” I shook my head, ignoring the overwhelming need to punch Dorian in the face. My heart was breaking all over again and I was tired. Tired of fighting, tired of being the one in charge, and most of all, I was tired of feeling.

I could feel Chess’ anguish and regret. It was under my skin, and I felt myself choking on it. His was overriding my own feelings of hurt and betrayal. It should have made me see reason. It should have made me realize how sorry he was, but all it did was infuriate me.

The angrier I became, the more distraught his feelings were, and I couldn’t take it anymore. I couldn’t even feel what I wanted to feel without him raining all over me. I needed a break. I needed to breathe. So I did the only thing I could do. I ran.



Chapter 15

One Last Message

A HOLE BEGAN to open up inside me the farther I ran from them. It widened and stretched and forced my run from a sprint to a slow trot. If this was what it was going to be like every time Chess and I separated, I didn't know how we were going to be able to live without each other.

I could still feel his pain. His wallowing despair that ate me up inside and told me the Shadows had not killed him after I left. It was a small blessing, but also just as much a curse. I couldn't handle my own emotions half the time, I didn't know if I could deal with both of ours at once. There had to be some way to shield myself from him. Some way to have some peace.

At that thought, I took a moment to take in where I had ended up. Running in the Underground wasn't like running in the human world. You might run down the same road every day and the scenery would never change, but here, things were ever changing and moving. If someone had ever made a map of the UnSeelie Court, it would change before you got a chance to use it.

Twisted trees with leafless branches lined the path. Darkness and an eerie calm filled the area. As my feet hit the dirt, a creeping dread accompanied the hole inside me. I knew where I was, but how I had gotten here was a mystery.

The Veil of the Faeries was not a pleasant place to be. The last time I had been here I'd been attacked by a horde of nasty little bug-like creatures. Though, if there were any kind of bug in the human world that could argue with you and call you names, we'd be in a world of trouble.

My feet moved on their own as if they knew something I did not, while the rest of me was tense and cautious of any faeries waiting in the brush. If I was lucky, they were still in the human world causing havoc. I'd been unlucky a lot lately, and I wanted to be prepared.

As I made my way down the path with nothing jumping out at me, my shoulders began to relax and that creeping dread all but disappeared. When I wasn't running for my life, the place was actually not that bad. A few

sprinklers and a good gardener, and it would be good to go, that was until a familiar tree came into view.

The last time I had seen the talking tree it had been decaying with only enough energy to talk to me through a dream, and even then, it had been overtaken by the Shadows. Now standing before it, I knew without even asking that the tree was good and truly dead.

Its bark was blackened and dry, its branches no longer held fruit or leaves. I couldn't feel any life coming from the tree and wondered how in the world it had ended up here. I stood there staring at the tree, not sure what to do, or where to go from here.

My feet had other ideas. I stumbled as they were forced forward and toward the tree. I held my hands out in front of me as they led me right up to the trunk. It was a good thing I had, because my feet didn't stop until I was good and pressed against the base of the tree. The moment I touched the tree, I knew that I had been wrong about it.

It wasn't dead. Not completely. It was barely hanging on and was using the last of its energy just to get me there. To show me one last thing. How I knew this I could only guess, it was projecting into my mind, like it had so many times before. Though, this time it was different, when it entered my mind to show me what it needed me to see, it wasn't a whole complete picture.

Jumbled images invaded my mind, and they were so sharp, so severe that they caused me to wince. The images were of my friends, Mop and Trip, even Chess was there. They were being absorbed by the Shadows, their very beings joining the collective of Fae that made up the forgotten Fae. The worst part was the face of the Shadows. It still held Dorian's body captive as it used him as a puppet for its own games.

It was a warning. What I could expect if I failed. Like I needed it. I knew what was at stake, but what I didn't know was why they would waste their last bit of energy to remind me?

Do not...

I jumped in place, my hand still on the base of the tree as the words whispered through my head, pained and so quiet I could scarcely hear.

...let...your love...get in the way.

"Don't let love get in the way?" I asked out loud and shook my head. "But how can I do that, when love is the final ingredient for the spell?"

I didn't get an answer for that one at first, and then when it did speak, it wasn't the answer I was looking for.

Love...will...win.

And then it was gone. It was like a rush of wind had come out of the tree. Maybe its soul was leaving? Did trees even have souls?

I stepped back from the tree. My feet crunched on the dirt beneath my feet. It didn't make sense, any of it. Don't let love get in the way, but love will win? It was a complete contradiction.

A flapping from behind me pulled me around to see Seer landing on the ground a few feet away. For once, she was wearing something modest and that didn't scream sex. Her six arms came out the sides of a long, pale blue maxi dress. Her feet were bare, while her periwinkle blue hair was left wild and untamed. Her pale blue face had a hint of red, and her breathing came in pants as she placed one of her hands over her heart.

"Where have you been? I have been looking for you everywhere," she said between breaths, her vibrant, cerulean wings sagging behind her.

"Here." I shrugged gesturing around me with a frown. "Why were you looking for me?"

"I had a vision of you facing the Shadows, and then something about a gaping hole." She made a confused face and clasped my hands in hers. "It sent everyone into a panic. We didn't know where you were or if you had failed. When Chess came to me, I could tell something was wrong, but he wouldn't say."

I looked away from her inquiring eyes and wrapped my arms around myself tightly. I knew why he was upset. Being this far away didn't keep me from being able to feel his pain. To know how sorry he was for what he had done. He wanted to make up for his mistake, and I wanted him too. He so easily lied to my face before and I didn't feel a thing. How could I trust he wouldn't do it again?

"Lady?" Seer placed a hand on my arm, and I turned my gaze to her, not liking the pity in her eyes. "Whatever has happened between you two can be fixed. You can't let the Shadows win."

Suspicion crept in and my eyes narrowed at her. "I thought you didn't know what happened?"

She gave a small, nonchalant shrug. "Sometimes it's better to let others tell me than to let on all that I've seen. Most people don't particularly like me to be in their personal business."

"I can imagine," I muttered, pulling away from her to put some distance between the tree and me. It couldn't help me anymore, and being here just felt morbid. Like I was hanging out by someone's grave.

"Where are you going now?" Seer's words followed me, her feet padding along the ground. "We really shouldn't stay here. The others are waiting."

"Others?"

A slight breeze ruffled my hair as her wings flapped. I glanced to the side where Seer landed. "Yes, others. Don't you want to see your friends? They are all waiting for you back at my home." One of her main hands gestured toward where I could only assume she lived.

"Of course I do, but I have to talk to my mother. I need to end this once in for all." My feet kept moving, not worried about her keeping up. She could fly if she got tired, or she could just hover.

"Yes, yes. Don't worry. I have a mirror back at my place, you can contact her from there, but really, Lady," she paused her dark eyes searching around her, a wariness in her voice. "We really shouldn't loiter here."

This time I stopped. "That is the second time you have tried to get us out of here. While I don't disagree, it's pretty creepy. It doesn't look like the faeries are home. So what gives?"

She visibly gulped and lowered her voice as she leaned into me. "There is a reason only the faeries live here and why everything is so..." her gaze flittered around. "...dead."

"Then why don't you tell me," I whispered back, annoyance starting to inch up in my voice.

If she noticed, she didn't say, her attention was too focused on the world around us. "This is a graveyard. Not just because of the dead plants, but this is where all Fae come when they die."

"I thought Fae couldn't die. That you were immortal?"

"Bah." She made a face. "You know better than to think that, you died."

"Yeah, but that was caused by magical forces, it's not the same thing." I held my hands up with a shake of my head. "And Chess already said you couldn't starve, well not right away anyways. It would take a long time, like centuries."

“See, we can still die.” She pointed a finger at me. “And there are other things too. We might heal fast but you could still kill one of us with iron or a good chop to the head.” Her hand sliced down in front of her as she demonstrated. “Then the remains are burned and brought here.”

I stared down at the dusty gray ground and had a sudden urge to jump up onto a rock or something. Who knew whose remains I was standing on? That still didn’t explain why we needed to leave so quickly.

“I see you will not take my word for it.” She sighed, a bit irritably, shaking her head. “I’m surprised you have lasted this long without dying because of your stubbornness.”

“I’m not stubborn. I’m just not an idiot who believes everything anyone tells me,” I said, defensively.

“That remains to be seen.” Her eyes lit with laughter and then her face sobered. “The faeries feed on the ashes of the fallen Fae, and in turn, they produce a sort of substance that can be harvested and put into our wines. In a way, we are taking back in the Fae who have left us, which is why humans get intoxicated quickly on it. There is a buildup of leftover magic in each drink, that shouldn’t be ingested by mere mortals.”

“Ew.” My nose wrinkled, and I had the urge to wash my mouth out with soap. I was never drinking faerie wine again. Circle of life or not, that was just disgusting.

“But that’s not all.” She shook a finger at me, silencing my disgust. “Fae aren’t like humans whose souls know where to go when they die, they have to be coaxed out. Thus, why we burn the remains to make them seem less attractive.”

I nodded my head like it made sense. The Fae were self-absorbed and shallow in life, why should they be any different in death? At least humans had the decency to know when you are down to stay down.

“So where do the souls go?”

“Ah, that’s the thing. They don’t go anywhere. They stay here.” She swept an arm around the veil. “Another job of the faeries is to make sure the spirits stay here, so that when the Reaper comes by they will be ready for him.”

“Reaper?”

It was her turn to nod, her hair falling over her face. “Yes, and no one knows when he will come by, so, it is best for us to be on our way and not get in his way.”

“Why? What will happen?” I cocked my head to the side, curiosity eating at me. I had heard talk of the Reaper before. My mother had made a deal with him to get rid of the Shadows. That obviously didn’t go over too well, and if I saw him, I’d like to have a word or two with him for making the deal in the first place.

“How should I know?” Befuddlement caused her brows to bunch together between her eyes. “No one has been here when he came—at least no one that survived to tell the tale.”

“But what—” I started, but a sudden chill overcame me. It wasn’t like my mother’s icy glare, where it was sharp and meant to hurt. Or like the Shadows where they couldn’t help the magic leaking off of them when they spoke causing your insides to freeze. This was a different kind of cold.

The kind that made the hairs on the back of your neck stand up but when you turned around no one was there. This was a feeling that made you want to go screaming into the darkness, because whatever was coming was so much worse.

It was that very feeling that kept me from arguing when Seer grabbed my hand and said, “Run.”



Chapter 16

Those We Fight For

I RAN FOR the second time in less than an hour, but this time I had a reason to run.

Seer pulled on my hand, trying to make me go faster. I could tell by the fluttering of her wings that she wanted to take flight but couldn't, because I was slowing her down. I almost told her to go on without me. The cold that I had felt seemed to trek after us as if seeking out our warmth. If it caught up with us, I didn't want to be found on my own.

We were almost to the woods; the trees were just a few yards away. I pushed myself to go faster, though my lungs burned and my knees ached. Just as we were about to cross the line of the trees, the cold feeling turned into a numbing sensation. I saw something out of the corner of my eye, it reached out to touch my shoulder. Before I could turn to see what it was, we crossed the trees and the presence faded away.

Seer collapsed against a tree, her wings hanging down to the ground as she caught her breath. I fell to the ground, not caring if I was getting myself dirty. My eyes were on where we had come from, where all was silent and nothing moved. Just how close to death had I been?

"Best not to dwell on it." Seer moved away from her leaning post and held a hand out to me. I gave one more cursory look toward the veil before placing my hand in hers, letting her pull me to my feet.

I let her lead as we made our way through the dark forest. The night had begun to wane and light poured through the treetops. The forest changed from dark and ominous to gray and dreary. Cheerful really wasn't a word that could ever be used to describe it.

"Where are we going?" I kept pace with Seer as she maneuvered through the trees and over branches like an old pro.

She didn't slow down or turn to me as she spoke, "Back to my home. Everyone is waiting for you."

"But can we get there through the forest?" I swept an arm around me, the forest not letting up the further we walked. "I went through the hedge maze the last time and that isn't anywhere close to here."

Seer snorted and rolled her eyes. “That’s because you came the back way. Not like it matters, you know how fickle the Underground can be. North might be north one day but the next it could be south.” She crossed her arms to demonstrate. “You try giving directions when your home keeps moving on you. The only place that doesn’t seem to move is the palace. Probably some kind of trick to it but of course the queens aren’t sharing.” Bitterness dripped from her voice as she frowned, but then she turned to me with a smile. “But that will all change once you are queen, won’t it?”

I winced at the question. Queen. How did I tell her that I would never be queen? At least not until my mother stepped down, not that she would, or I wanted her to. I had no intentions of being queen, even if given the chance. I was happy enough to stay in the human world where at least I could find my house without a magical low jack on it.

Seer’s smile lowered at my expression. “What is it? You do want to be queen, don’t you? The people are already loyal to you on both sides. You could be Queen of the whole Underground with a snap of your fingers and no one would argue the point.”

“My mother would,” I interjected. “You know she won’t give up her power to anyone, not even her daughter. Besides, I don’t think I would make a very good queen. I can’t even keep a job.” I shook my head at the memory of the one job I had gotten since moving back from New York.

Everyone told me going to school for English Literature was a bad idea. They’d said I’d never find a job. And they were right. Unless I wanted to be a writer, or had an in with a publishing house, the only other options were being a teacher or a librarian. The last option was the one I had been reduced to when I came back to Iowa and I’d already lost that job because of the whole Fae fiasco.

It was hard to keep a full-time job and save the world. Just ask Superman! Then again Superman could move at the speed of light and didn’t have a snotty mean girl for a boss.

“Pfft.” Three hands waved me off. “Don’t sell yourself so short. Maybe you aren’t good at the human jobs because you were meant for something else? Something magical? Hmm?” her eyebrows rose as she gave me a knowing look. “You’ll never know until you try.”

I chewed on my lip, and not wanting to burst her bubble, I gave a noncommittal answer, “We’ll see.”

“That’s right we will!” her hands clapped together and her face lit up with glee before three hands stopped and pointed. “Look, we are almost there!”

An archway in front of us made of two trees that had been bent and twisted into each other stood a few paces ahead. On the outside of the trees there was just more forest, but through the opening of the arch, vibrant, multicolored mushrooms grew from the ground. I didn’t know how long it had been there or if it just magically appeared. Either way, I probably would have never found it on my own.

As we approached the arch, I let Seer take the lead. Cowardly? Probably. But I’d learned my lesson about going head first into doorways on my own, and while I could see what was on the other side, I still didn’t completely trust the magic of the Underground. Jaded? Who me?

“Come now, let’s get you back. We have to contact the queen as soon as possible.” Seer stepped through the archway, and when she didn’t immediately disappear, and was still there on the other side surrounded by mushrooms, I stepped through after her.

When my feet went from dirt to cushy green grass the hole in my heart grew just a little bit smaller, and I knew I was close to Chess. I followed after Seer, and with each step, my heart thudded harder and my hands began to sweat.

Why was I nervous? It wasn’t like I hadn’t seen Chess in a while. Yes, we had just declared our love to each other, and then he went and lied to me, but I also didn’t stay to let him explain. I shouldn’t be this nervous, he should be. That’s when I realized, it wasn’t just me, but it was Chess too.

He must have sensed me the moment I got closer like I had, and like with the hole, the closer we got the more strongly we felt the other’s feelings. So my nervousness ended up being amplified by his. God, I couldn’t imagine how this would affect our day to day lives, let alone if we had kids!

I couldn’t help but smile a bit at that thought. While having little Chesses running around sounded like a good idea, it tickled me that for once Chess would be able to understand what childbirth was like — and cramps! God, I forgot about those.

My thoughts made the nervous jitters lessen and mild curiosity came from Chess. He was probably wondering what the hell I was thinking about to be so amused.

Seer walked beside me oblivious to the inner exchange of emotions between Chess and I. I had been walking slowly alongside her when all of a sudden; a sharp pang of need hit me. My feet sped up, and I found myself power walking, almost on the verge of running. It took all that I had to keep myself from sprinting toward where Chess was like a beacon in the night.

My eyes finally landed on a group of Fae, like those I had seen through the mirror, but there were way more than I had initially thought. I scanned the crowd, even as my magic kept moving me toward my other half. Even through the pulsing need, I was able to make out a few new creatures I'd never seen before.

Frog and fish like creatures stood on two legs with waistcoats. A turtle with an eyeglass and top hat stood beside a hound dog that was quieting his pups. As I made my way through the crowd, all eyes turned to me, and a rush of self-consciousness filled me.

That aching need was only getting stronger the further I went, and I felt like there was a huge neon sign pointing at me. Letting everyone there know just how desperate I was to get to Chess. My face heated as I imagined exactly what they smelled.

I thought about using my magic to mask my scent, but that would point an even bigger finger at me. So, instead, I kept my eyes forward and tried not to think about all the eyes on me. When Mop stepped out of the crowd to greet me, I even bypassed him and kept going. He was probably frowning at my back, but I couldn't be forced to care, all thoughts were on fulfilling the want inside me.

A movement in the crowd in front of me caught my attention. Fae were being pushed aside left and right, and I could catch a glimpse of pale pink hair and a twitching ear in between each movement. Eventually, the crowd took the hint and parted, revealing a ferocious feline that froze me in place.

The curiosity in him had faded and his desire reached out and caressed mine and it caused it to flare even brighter. The intensity of it made me gasp and my insides clench. The world around us faded, and I couldn't see anyone but him.

I waited with desperate anticipation as he took one step after the other until he was standing in front of me. He didn't say anything, and though we were both consumed with our need, I could feel his need to apologize in the

back of my throat. I think I nodded, or maybe I just thought it, but the next thing I knew his mouth was on mine.

If the crowd was watching us I wouldn't have known, my hands buried in his hair and my front pressed tightly against his as we tried to meld ourselves together. His clawed hands gripped the sides of my arms, almost tight enough to break the skin. I heard a loud groan and realized with a start that it came from me. The haze that had been clouding my mind faded, and I quickly took the opportunity to get a grip on myself.

My hands loosened in his silky tresses and moved to push against his steel chest still pressed against mine. Chess didn't take the hint. He was too wrapped up in the desire to be closer to me. My magic built up, and I pressed it toward him, just to give him a little zap, but all that did was send a wave of pleasure between us. It was like he was inside me, caressing parts that should never be touched, and it almost caused me to lose my grip again.

Thankfully, someone cleared their throat, reminding me once more that we weren't alone. It was what I needed to finally rip myself away from Chess, and my eyes popped open. I kept my gaze on Chess' face not daring to look at those around us. My face was already as red as a tomato. I didn't think it could get any worse, but I didn't want to take the chance.

My reluctance to participate anymore caused the grip on my shoulders to lessen and Chess opened his green orbs. His eyes were still a bit clouded, but there was just a hint of him still in there that told me he was closer to himself than before.

"Hi," I breathed. He smiled until just a hint of fang was showing.

"Hello, pet." His hands smoothed down the sides of my arms, rubbing them in a comforting motion. My embarrassment lessened a bit at the movement and I returned his smile.

"I'm glad you are okay." I chewed on my lip and peered up at him with uncertainty. "I was worried he might have done something to you when I left."

Bitterness hit me like a sledgehammer to the chest and it made me stumble. Chess' hands grabbed me before I could fall and the bitterness turned to concern.

"We really need to get a hold on this or we are going to go crazy." I shook my head at him, there was no need to explain what this was his agreement was clear enough.

A throat cleared once again, this time with annoyance from its owner. We turned toward the sound to see Mop standing beside us, irritation on his brown face. His arms were crossed and his foot tapped, he was the only one out of all the Fae who had the audacity to be mad at us when the rest of them were either embarrassed, pretending not to watch, or had hunger in their eyes.

“Sorry, Mop. I didn’t mean to ignore you, I was just...preoccupied.” My gaze slid to Chess who shot me an emotion so intense I had to close my eyes for a moment to catch my breath. I threw him an annoyed look that I knew he could feel as well but he replied with a cheeky grin.

“That!” Mop shouted, his short pudgy finger pointing at us. “What ya’ll be doin’?”

I shuffled my feet and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “It’s complicated.”

Mop snorted and then leaned in close to sniff the air in front of him. “That complication be havin’ to do with why the cat be smellin’ like ye?”

My eyebrows rose and I had a sudden urge to sniff Chess and then myself in return. Weirdly, Chess didn’t seem surprised that we smelled the same. Did our exchange of magic cause it? I wouldn’t have thought that it would change our scents, but with my limited knowledge of magic, I shouldn’t be surprised.

“Lady!” an ecstatic voice called out and a familiar pair of floppy ears came into view followed by the rest of the hopping opalaught. “Lady, Trip missed Lady, Trip did!”

A smile spread across my face, and I kneeled down until I was eye level with him. Holding my arms out to him for a hug, I couldn’t help but bury my face into his fur as we embraced. I might complain about the Underground, but one thing I couldn’t get enough of was this little fur ball and his forever innocent and cheerful nature.

“I missed you too, Trip.” I squeezed him tight and then pulled him away. “But you shouldn’t be here. None of you should.” I let my eyes scan over the crowd.

“But we wanted to help Lady, we did.” Trip frowned, his ears falling down around his face, his sadness tugging at my heart.

Mop stepped forward, placing a hand on my shoulder. “We be wantin’ ye to know ye ain’t alone in this. We be willin’ to fight for ye since it be our home ye be fightin’ for. Ye don’ be havin’ to go at it alone.”

My gaze softened at the brownie, not expecting such a speech from him. It was almost not grumpy at all. At the beginning of all this I would have been delighted to take him up on that offer but since then I'd learned the hard way what it meant to be up against the Shadows. If I took them into battle I wouldn't just be gaining an army, I'd be giving Dorian targets to use against me. I had no doubt that he would stoop so low, the Shadows had.

"While I appreciate the offer, Mop. This is really something I have to do alone." I placed my hand on top of his, giving it a reassuring pat. "I would feel more secure if I knew you were somewhere safe away from all of this." I gave him a teasing smile. "Besides, I met your wife and that is not a woman who would stay a widow long, should you not come back."

"Well, I...uh..." Mop sputtered, his face turning red as he stared down at his shoes.

Having mercy I turned my attention back to the creature in my arms. "And you..." I tapped Trip on the nose with a smile. "I need you to take care of Alice and my garden, in case I don't come back."

"Don't say that, Lady, don't." he shook his head sadly, his tail swaying behind him as he clung to me. "Lady's carrots are the best, no way can Trip compare, no way."

"I'm sure you will get the hang of it, but that's only *if* things go wrong. That doesn't mean I won't go down without a fight." I put my fists up to show him I was ready for anything, but he didn't smile, if anything, his expression fell further. Letting out a sigh, I patted him on the head before standing to my feet.

Twisting around to where Seer was standing off to the side waiting I asked, "Are you ready?"

Glancing around the area, and then to Chess who held his hand out to me. I clasped mine in his and turned back to her. "Let's go."



Chapter 17

Words and Blood

THE MIRROR SEER brought us to was not the one that led to the Shadows Between. It was a smaller, square shaped one that was a little ways away from the crowd of Fae.

They didn't run and hide like I had tried to urge them. They seemed dead set on seeing this through, even if it was from afar. They wanted to be there together no matter what happened.

I couldn't fault them. If the fate of my world was narrowed down to one ex-librarian that didn't really belong anywhere, I'd be a little nervous too. Hell, I was nervous because it was me. Dear God, don't let me fuck this up.

I reached my hand up to touch the frame of the mirror, my mother at the forefront of my mind, but my hand was stopped by Chess'. I turned to him with a questioning look. He gave my hand a small squeeze and smiled.

"Let's do it together."

My lips tipped up and I nodded. Chess drew my hand up until we touched the frame of the mirror. The surface rippled and churned longer than usual. At first, I thought it wouldn't give us what we wanted. Did we think two different things? Was she not near a mirror? But then the mirror stopped and the image of my mother sitting at her vanity appeared.

She was alone without her guards or servants. Her head was down and she was staring hard at something in her hands. I squinted to see what it was.

It was a tiny cloth doll with blue hair and cream-colored skin. It wore a little red dress that didn't go with her hair at all. She had a stitch on one arm where she had caught it on the thorn bush in the gardens. I knew because it was my doll she was holding.

My nanny at the time had given it to me as a gift, and I had taken it everywhere. I loved that doll more than anything else and when she had gotten a tear, I had made the mistake of running to my mother begging her to fix it. She had scoffed at me looking at the doll with disgust.

“Princesses should not play with silly toys such as this.” She had grabbed it from me and thrown it to one of the guards. “Get rid of it.”

I had begged and pleaded with her to let me keep it, but she just sent me to my room. As I cried myself to sleep that night, I had learned a hard lesson about my mother. That was the day I vowed I’d never be like her, and I never asked her for anything ever again.

Except for today. “Hello, Mother.”

Her head jerked up from the doll, surprise filling her face before it smoothed into her usual icy stare. “Daughter, I wasn’t expecting you so soon. I see you got your cat back, well done.” She nodded her head toward Chess, who pressed the front of his body against my side.

It was a comfort to have him so close, but it was also distracting. The magic in me that called out to his was getting restless. We had placated it when we kissed, but it wasn’t nearly enough. I shoved it back down like bile rising in my throat and fixated all my attention on the woman in the mirror.

“Yes, the queen helped us out with that.” Let her think I had Mab on my side. It wasn’t a complete lie.

“Oh?” Her eyebrows rose. “I didn’t know she was seeing visitors already. My visit must have cheered her up more than I thought. Well, good for her.” The words were meant to be kind but they were tinged with anger.

What had happened between them? I didn’t ask. It would be a waste of time. I was lucky to get the answers to important questions, let alone those that were just for curiosity’s sake.

“I’m not calling to chat about the family.”

“Really? Then what, pray tell, are you bothering me in my private quarters for?” she sat up further in her chair, smoothing her hands over her gown. This one was not like her usual attire. It was a dark blue that was loose and floated down below the vanity top. Her hair wasn’t in a complicated do; it fell down around her shoulders. Had I caught her before she was going to bed?

Ignoring the need to ask, I lifted my chin to meet her eyes. “I want the words.”

For a moment she didn’t answer, she watched me with careful consideration before she asked, “What words?”

Annoyance stabbed at me, and I gave Chess a look that said to calm down. It wouldn’t do for us to screw this up when we were so close.

“No more games, Mother. You know what I want.” I chose my words carefully, happy that my voice came out steady and confident.

Sniffing, she closed her eyes briefly before picking up her brush from the vanity. She slid the bristles over her hair in slow, precise movements. Each stroke a calculated movement. She was thinking so hard I swore I could almost hear her thoughts. She was considering not giving them to me, or at least not without a fight.

The realization caused a rage in me that made my magic spark to life. The magic in Chess responded, in turn, brushing along my skin where his body pressed against mine. The combination caused a volatile reaction that caused the mirror to crackle and shake.

It must have affected the mirror on her side, because her eyes snapped up and her brush paused mid-brush. There was a hint of fear in her eyes that made part of me smile. She was finally realizing that her fears of me were true.

“The words, Mother,” I said slowly, with a hint of violence in my voice.

Setting the brush down, her lips pressed firmly together like she wanted to say something but was holding back. She placed her hands on top of the vanity and drew her shoulders back as if prepping herself for a role.

“You must say these words exactly or it will not work. It is a variation of a blood oath, and if you don’t get the wording right, then they might find a way to wiggle out of it, and then we’ll be right back where we started.”

I didn’t have to ask who they were. If you gave them a chance to manipulate your words then they would do it in a heartbeat. If she said I had to say them exactly, then that was what I was going to do.

“Understood.” I nodded, letting her know I was ready.

“Blood of like blood, my heart to yours, return to the realm from which you came and dwell here no longer.” As she said the words a chill spread along my skin, causing goose bumps to rise.

I held back the urge to rub them away, and instead, focused on remembering the words. Blood of like blood? Was it because I was a half-breed and that sort of made us the same? Neither of us belonged to one world, but the Shadows belonged more to the Shadow Realm than any other world anyways.

The second part, my heart to yours, didn’t sit well. What did that mean? Could that be the part that Chess warned me about that could cause

me to die? I hoped not.

The last part was fairly obvious. It was demanding them to go back to where they came from. But what if what they thought they came from was this world and not the Shadow Realm? Would that be enough for them to change the deal?

The words obviously held power from just her saying them. So, would they be even more powerful when combined with blood? I couldn't say I looked forward to that part.

"Where did you get the spell from?" Chess spoke up beside me, his unease pressing onto me. At least I wasn't the only one unsure about the words.

My mother wasn't surprised by the question and simply shrugged. "Oh, around."

"That's likely." The sarcasm dripped from my words as I frowned. "It's a fair question. I don't want to be saying something I don't know for sure will work. How do I know you aren't just sending me to my death?"

It was her turn to frown. She made an audible noise in the back of her throat and then picked up the doll she had discarded.

"I might not have been the best of mothers." I snorted and she glared at me. "But, whether or not you believe it, I've always had your interest at heart. Maybe after this is all over we could start over and have the kind of relationship you always wanted?"

I was taken aback by the hopefulness in her voice. She wanted a relationship with me? Her? The one who had spent my whole life shutting me out and then keeping me from anyone else that could possibly influence me to think the wrong way? I didn't think so.

"Yeah, maybe. If I don't die in the process," I said instead of what I was thinking.

Dropping the doll to the vanity, she sighed. "You aren't going to die, Lynne." The sound of my name on her lips sounded more natural than I wanted to admit.

Chess wasn't fooled by her words, his hand tightened around me. "How do you know?"

"Because, the spell is meant to suck them back into the Shadow Realm. The Reaper gave it to me himself. The only way you would die is if you aren't strong enough to resist the pull." Her condescending attitude was back in full force.

“What pull?” I asked her.

“Of the blood, of course. Saying the words are all fine and dandy but without the blood, it is practically useless. The blood is everything.” Her eyes glinted at the mention of blood, a kind of hunger reaching her eyes.

“Is that it?” her hunger was creeping me out, and I wanted nothing more to not see her anymore.

“Don’t forget what I said,” she said before I could end the call. “We could have the relationship you always wanted. The kind your human mother can’t give you.”

The mention of my human mother made my blood boil. How dare she even speak of her? If I had a choice between her and the queen, I would choose her every time. My human mother might not be perfect, but at least she hadn’t tried to breed me or get me killed.

“I might not be able to remove you from your throne but know this...” My gaze hardened at her. “There will be changes when this is all over. Big changes, and if I am not here to personally see to it.” Chess squeezed my hand, a reassuring feeling passing to me. “Chess will make sure my wishes are followed, and remember, he hasn’t made any such promise.”

My mother’s eyes glanced to Chess and back to me. She nodded a bit more vigorously, showing how affected she was by my threat. For the first time ever, my mother looked old. Her eyes were strained and there were lines on her face. It made me wonder if this whole ordeal had aged her, or if she had been using glamour this whole time? I almost pitied her, but then remembered this was her fault in the first place, and I was the one paying the price.

“Good,” I continued, “Then we understand one another.” I was about to turn away from the mirror but stopped. “And if we never see each other again, you should rethink how you treat others. Right now father is still on your side, but push him too much, and you will end up losing him.” I gave her a sad smile. “Immortality is a wondrous and lonely burden to bear.”

I watched her expression morph from cautious to anger, and I thought she was going to lash out at me, but she didn’t. Instead, she bowed her head slightly. “Thank you. I will take that under advisement.”

The mirror cleared and a sense of relief mixed with dread filled me. We had the words, we knew what to do. It was finally time to end it all.



Chapter 18

Final Showdown

CHESS AND I left the Seer's home in the Mushroom City with plenty of tears of goodbye, mainly from Trip, and made our way to where we had last seen Dorian. Chess' willow.

When we arrived at the willow it was quiet. The tree that had been withering had all but been destroyed. Chess' throne no longer stood. It was in a million pieces on the ground. Dorian was nowhere in sight.

"Well, where do we go now?" I put my hands on my hips and tapped my foot as I thought. It was too much to hope that Dorian would be where we last saw him. He was no doubt off causing havoc on someone else's life or finding new ways to torture me.

The Shadows, pre-Dorian, were all about pleasing me. Trying to seduce me to their side. But with Dorian thrown into the mix, it seemed like they were fighting for control. He wanted to get me back, but he also wanted me to suffer, well, more like he wanted Chess to suffer, and that just happened to cause me pain in return.

I knew better than to ask Chess where he thought we should go next, his befuddlement was like a blow horn in my head. Sharing emotions made things easier, but it also made it harder to think. While we were apart, the emotions weren't so intense, like a dull roar in the back of my mind, but close like this made it almost impossible to ignore what he was feeling.

I imagined it was the same for him and tried to keep my relief to myself. I knew I was going to have to face Dorian eventually, but could I really be blamed for being relieved that I had a short reprieve, even if it meant I was just delaying the inevitable?

A warm hand covered mine, and I twisted around as Chess brought my hand up to his mouth. He pressed his lips to the underside of my wrist, a small understanding smile on his face. The press of his mouth against my wrist caused a sharp spike of desire and his smile broadened while his eyes darkened. I guess I wasn't that good at hiding my emotions after all.

Gently removing my hand from his, I cleared my throat and looked away. "Since they aren't here anymore we could probably use your mirror

to get somewhere else and cut back on the travel time, but I haven't the first clue as to where to go next."

Chess hummed as he thought, his clawed finger tapping his face while his other hand propped against his hip. His pale pink hair had been braided and hung down his back, where his tail swung back and forth in a hypnotic pattern. I pulled my eyes away from his tail in case he thought I was ogling his backside and stepped forward.

"Maybe we should go inside? I don't know about you but standing out here in the open is creeping me out." I started toward the trunk of the tree but was pulled back by Chess' hand on my wrist. I glanced up from my wrist to his emerald eyes. His ears were stiff on top of his head, and a sudden pang of wariness hit me. "What is it?"

"Do you hear that?" His ear twitched again, and his wariness changed to panic just as his eyes widened, and he yelled, "Run!"

Not needing to be told twice, my feet started toward the tree again. I felt it right as we reached the entrance. The ground shook beneath us in a foot pounding rhythm. I gripped the trunk of the willow just to keep from falling over as the shaking increased.

"It's getting closer!" Chess shouted at my side. He was crouched down with his hands on the ground as he tried to keep his balance against the moving earth.

I held onto the tree for dear life. My eyes went to the trees around us. To one side there was a disturbance that was forcing trees to one side. Birds flew out in its wake. I couldn't tell what it was yet, but it was big, and I didn't want to wait to find out.

"How do we get inside?" I pushed against the side of the willow's trunk, trying to find a way into Chess' home, but it wouldn't budge.

Chess crawled up the trunk from his crouched position and pressed his hand against the side. Last time, we had easily walked right through the trunk, but not even Chess' clawed hand could breach the surface of the bark.

"It's not working." He shook his head, panic rising in him, and in turn, spilled into me. "This has never happened before. I don't know why it won't work. Unless..." he trailed off, his eyes as round as saucers. His face scrunched down in an angry frown.

"Unless what?" I probed, the trees closest to us were being shoved aside, and I could see just a hint of a scale and wing. Red eyes gleamed

between the trees, locking onto me. A roar caused my heart to stop beating for a moment before I turned back to the tree, banging on it with all my might.

“Open up, you fucking asshole.” I kicked and beat at the tree, my hands becoming raw from the bark biting into my skin. Chess grabbed my wrists and forced me to stop, jerking me around to look at him.

“You can’t get in that way. The connection is broken.” His eyes darted from me to the tree line where the last remaining trees were being pummeled into the ground.

What stepped into the clearing was nothing short of a dragon. Its large wings spanned out at least ten feet each way. Its scale-covered body was three times the size of the JubJub bird, and its claws were so sharp that they dug into the ground with each pounding step it took. If its size wasn’t enough to scare the living daylights out of me, the enormous teeth that protruded out of its mouth destroyed any thoughts of trying to reason with the creature.

Chess and I bolted from the tree toward the other side of the clearing. Our feet moved in time as we raced toward safety. Once we hit the trees we’d have a fighting chance. Once we were past the trees we could lose ourselves in the woods and find another way to the Shadows. That is...once we hit the trees.

We never reached the trees. The moment we got around the willow, and down the path on the other side, we screeched to a halt. Dorian stood at the tree line. His hands were behind his back and feet spread apart with a smile that said, “Gotcha.”

“Where are you going?” Dorian cocked his head to the side. His dark hair spilled over the side of his face. “Don’t you want to meet my new pet?”

“Not particularly.” I retorted, not hiding the disdain from my voice.

“What a pity.” He pouted and then smiled like he had a new toy he wanted to show off. “I found him wandering around the Between and saved the beast from a life of boredom. He is ever so grateful and will do just about anything for me. Won’t you, my little Jabberwocky?”

I grimaced at the tone he used when talking to the beast. One thing I hated more than anything was people who talked to their animals like they were babies. People shouldn’t even talk to babies like that, let alone their pets.

At Dorian's appearance, the monstrous beast had stopped its decent onto us. It waited at the base of the willow like a dog waiting did his master's call. Sitting there with its long tail wrapped around its legs, it wasn't quite a terrifying, as it had been when it was chasing us.

I turned away from it and shrugged not impressed. "What can I say? I'm more of a cat person."

A twinge of amusement filled me, and I chanced a glance at Chess, who seemed to be fighting not to smile. Dorian, however, did not find my comment funny. Something dark slid behind his gaze and his smile fell.

A growl reverberated down my spine. Hot air blew against the back of my neck. My body tensed, but I didn't turn. I wouldn't give the jerk the satisfaction of seeing me scared.

"Knock it off, we both know you aren't going to kill me." I crossed my arms with a confident smirk. I was partly bluffing. A part of me hoped that Dorian didn't hate me enough to kill me. That he was still wrapped up in the whole wanting to be with me thing. The Shadows, though, were another story.

They might have wanted me to be their queen at one point, but I was pretty sure they had figured out that there was no chance in hell that I'd be down for that. It was probably why they took Dorian in the first place, to try to appeal to me in a different manner. It hadn't worked, but they got an A for effort.

"Like you are not here to kill me?" he snarled, his hands fisted at his side and rage contorting his face. "Or to send me to the realm from which I came?"

Him quoting back part of the spell threw me through a loop. Had he been spying on us? How else would he know the words of the very spell I was sent here to use on him? So much for the element of surprise.

"So what?" I shrugged, rolling my eyes. "It's not like it was a big secret or anything. I've been telling you since we met that I wouldn't be yours. It is your fault you got it into your head that having Dorian as your puppet would change that."

A sort of ripple ran through Dorian's body, and the anger that was on his face twisted into a disturbing smile. That smile told me that Dorian was no longer with us, and the one looking back out of his eyes was the Shadow man. Creepy and cheerful at the same time, I'd rather face him than my ex any day.

“You are not being completely honest, my queen.” His voice hissed along my skin. “I believe when we first met you promised to think about joining us. I do not believe you were being truthful then, either. Now were you?”

“Not really.”

He had me there. When I had said I’d think about it, I hadn’t actually thought about it. It hadn’t even crossed my mind, not seriously anyways. The thought of ruling the Underground was not on my list of aspirations. Getting out of here alive was my top priority right underneath a hot bath and a large glass of wine. Scratch that. Make it a whole bottle of wine.

My response didn’t help my cause and his smile curled down. He seemed stumped. As if he couldn’t imagine that I would confirm his accusation. Weeks ago, when this all started, I probably would have lied my ass off, but now that it was down to it, I just wanted it over and this was the fastest way there was to piss him off.

“Very well, then.” He recovered from his initial confusion and straightened the sleeves of his puffy black shirt. “If you are still determined to be stubborn I suppose I will have to revert to extreme measures.”

My stomach sank. I didn’t like the sound of that. A roar broke out from behind us. Chess and I stumbled against each other. We clutched onto each other, trying to keep our balance against the shaking ground.

“So, you like cats do you? Maybe after my pet takes care of yours, you will be a bit more open to my offer.” I somehow heard Dorian’s parting words over the resounding sound and turned my head to argue with him. But a white hole had appeared, seemingly ripped open out of nothing, and he was stepping through it, leaving Chess and me with the rampaging Jabberwocky.



Chapter 19

Sacrifice

I DIDN'T HAVE time to worry about how the hell they had made a hole out of nothing, because I was shoved to the ground by Chess. My mouth got buried in the dirt. I tried to push back up, but Chess kept me pressed down with his body. I turned my head to ask him what the hell when a claw swiped the air above us. The rush of air was right where I had been standing before.

"Thanks." I gasped but didn't have time to say anymore when a shadow appeared above us.

I rolled to the side. The claw slammed down next to me. Scrambling to my feet, I backed away from the Jabberwocky. My eyes swiftly searched out Chess, who had already gotten back to his feet. There wasn't any pain coming from him, but the same panic and disarray in him pumped through me.

"What should we do, pet?" he called out after a particularly loud roar came from the Jabberwocky when he swung at Chess and missed, pushing the feline further away from the hole Dorian had made.

I looked to the hole and back to the Jabberwocky and it clicked. He wasn't just trying to hurt us; he was trying to keep us from following his master. We needed to get to that hole.

I opened my mouth to tell Chess but was hit from behind. I screamed as the scales of the Jabberwocky's tail scrapped my back. I could hear Chess yelling my name as I was thrown across the clearing.

I groaned, my back burning. My head throbbed, and I fought to get back to my feet. Just as I got my bearings, a searing pain scorched my side, bringing me to my knees. I glanced down at where the pain was but nothing was there. There were no tears in the cloth, no blood, nothing.

Another sharp sting to my side, followed by Chess' outcry caused my head to jerk up. The Jabberwocky had gotten a hold of Chess. It gripped him in its claws. The pain wasn't mine. It was Chess'.

Gathering my strength, I did my best to ignore the pain. I pushed myself back to my feet and stumbled toward the dragon creature.

“Hey you!” I called out, grabbing my side as the claws on Chess squeezed harder. The Jabberwocky turned its gaze to me but didn’t drop Chess. “Put him down.”

“Why human?” the deep crackling voice that replied sent a wave of shock through me.

“You can talk?” I didn’t know why the fact that the Jabberwocky could talk surprised me so much. Maybe it was the fact that he had been playing faithful pet the entire time, or maybe, I was just tired and my brain wasn’t working right. Either way, if he could talk that meant he could be reasoned with.

“Of course, I can talk. I am not an animal.” He growled through gnashing teeth. His grip on Chess didn’t loosen, and it caused me to gasp at the same time that Chess cried out.

“Then why are you working for the bad guy?” I argued, trying and failing to ignore the pressure on my ribs. If he squeezed tight enough to crush Chess’ ribs would it break mine? Or would I just feel the pain? I didn’t want to find out.

“I owe them a debt and debts must be paid.” The fact that he called Dorian a them and not a him proved he knew more about what was going on than I gave him credit for.

“But if you let us go we can get rid of them for you, and your debt won’t matter anymore.” I winced. The throbbing in my back overrode some of the pain Chess was feeling. I was sure I was probably bleeding, but there was nothing I could do about it now.

The Jabberwocky seemed to think on it for a moment, his other clawed hand coming up to stroke his chin. If I wasn’t in so much pain, the sight alone would have made me laugh.

“Debts cannot be forgotten so easily. I am not to hurt you, but they have asked that I persuade you, and that is what I plan to do, starting with your mate here.” His claw clamped down around Chess’ form and I cried out. His claw had pierced into Chess’ side. Blood poured out of the wound and onto the ground below. It took everything I had not to fall to the ground in agony.

The creature glanced between Chess and my gasping form. It seemed to figure something out. He gave Chess another small squeeze that forced me to whimper and drop to my knees.

“How is it that you feel this one’s pain?” The curiosity on his face reminded me of a child that had just figured out how to pull the head off its doll.

“It’s a long story,” I said between gasps of pain. “Bandersnatch. Exchange of magic. Now we’re connected.” I gave a short laugh that turned to a groan. “I guess it wasn’t a long story after all.”

“I see.” The Jabberwocky mused, humming in its throat. “Will you die if I kill this one?” he gave Chess a little shake that made both of us cry out.

“I...I don’t know.” I wheezed. “But I wouldn’t chance it if I were you.” I had to find some way to get him to drop Chess. Any more of this and I wasn’t going to be of much use myself.

Pushing the pain away while the creature thought about it, I gathered up my magic until it hummed along my skin. Chess made a startled noise, and I shook my head at him. Don’t draw attention to me I thought hard at him.

The dragon was still thinking when I shoved the power into the ground. The ground rippled and sprouted little plants. The dirt rumbled beneath our feet and the creature’s attention turned back to me but it was too late.

Thick vines shot out of the ground toward the Jabberwocky. They wrapped around his throat, around his arms and legs, jerking him from all sides. He roared and ripped at the vines, dropping Chess in the process.

The moment Chess hit the floor it was like all the air had been knocked out of me, but I didn’t stop. I kept shoving magic into the ground, bringing more and more vines to the surface to trap the Jabberwocky.

He tried to shred the vines, but they were too thick, and there were too many of them coming at him at once. I was about to push more magic into it when out of the corner of my eye, I saw where Chess had fallen, right in the path of where the Jabberwocky was being dragged to the ground. In a quick thought, I redirected some of my energy toward where he lay. The vine wrapped around him like a cocoon and delivered him to the ground next to me.

With Chess safe by my side, I turned back to the task at hand. The Jabberwocky was down on its knees. His arms and legs were firmly trapped beneath my pile of vines, and thus, he was reduced to biting at them.

For each vine he chewed through, five more replaced them. I knew I couldn’t keep it up much longer. I already felt that edge that usually sent me

into a power hungry frenzy. I wasn't sure I was strong enough to come back from it this time. When I was about to give up and make a run for the tear, Chess' hand landed on top of mine, and a rush of magic shot through me and into the earth.

New vines shot from the ground and encircled the Jabberwocky's jaw, closing its mouth from doing any more damage. He struggled for a moment, and I worried he might break out, but then he stopped moving, his dark red eyes gleaming at us in a silent rage.

I knelt there on the ground just breathing. I'd stopped him. I beat a fucking dragon! I gave a short laugh at the realization. When I turned to Chess to brag my smile fell.

Chess lay beaten and bloodied on the ground. His eyes were closed and his chest barely moved up and down. I reached a hand out to him, trying to find the wound on his side to stop the bleeding.

The cut was not as bad as the ones he had suffered by my mother's hands but still bleeding enough to cause worry. Grabbing the edge of Chess' shirt, I yanked it until it ripped. Balling the shirt up, I pressed it against the wound. It caused a groan from Chess and a sharp pain in me that left me gasping.

"Kat." My name fell from his lips, and his eyes fluttered open, the orbs glazed over from the pain.

I shushed him and lifted one hand to stroke his face. "Save your strength."

The stubborn cat ignored me and tried to reach out to me. "You have to go on. Finish this. I'll be all right." He groaned and stopped to catch his breath before giving me a weak smile. "I've healed worse than this, kitten."

"But I can't just leave you, what if the Jabberwocky gets loose?" my gaze swept over the bound creature still glaring at us.

"He did his part. Once you are gone, I don't think he will bother me anymore." His words came out strained and slow. While he told me he was fine, I could feel that he wasn't. If he was feeling even half of what I was, he couldn't be. But did I really have a choice?

I grabbed his hand, placing it on the spot where mine had been pressing against the wound. I placed a hand on either side of his face and leaned in close.

"Don't you die on me, Cheshire." I pressed my forehead to his, closing my eyes briefly. "When I get back we are going to get you stitched up and

I'll play nurse to you for as long as you want." I gave a small laugh and smiled. "I'll even get a short little outfit to wait on you in."

Chess chuckled at this and then winced. "Sounds lovely, pet."

I pressed my mouth to his, careful of his side as I leaned into him. His lips met mine in a lingering kiss that didn't last long enough before whispering, "I love you."

"And I you." His emerald orbs gazed at me softly before he gestured with his head. "Go, end this."

Pulling back, I nodded; my eyes burning from unshed tears. Whether it would end with my death or not, it would be over soon.

I stood from the ground and gave one prolonged look back over my shoulder at Chess. I gave him a thumbs up and a smile before turning back to the hole. I rounded my shoulders and stepped through the tear. It was time to kick some Shadow ass.



THE BETWEEN. THE GOD damn fucking Between. If there was one place in the universe I wished never to be again it was here.

The world was white and seemed never ending, like the inside of a bleached butthole. There was nothing there but the tear and a dark shadow in the distance. I could still feel Chess' pain, and I steeled myself against it as I forced my feet to move toward the shadow.

As I approached it, a sickening, evil feeling overwhelmed me. The shadow wasn't Dorian. It couldn't be. It was too vile, too full of darkness to be my ex-fiancé.

It was, though. Or part of it was. The person—the creature standing before me was not a full person anymore. Cloaked in a cloud of black darkness that seemed to leak from every pore, the Shadow man stood waiting, his back to me. When my footsteps reached him, he turned slowly, his hands out to the side as if to welcome me into his embrace.

"Katherine," his voice burned my ears, and I felt a jolt in my stomach at the sound of my full name. "How nice of you to join us. I can rest assured that my pet did his work well, or did our lovely Moderator skip out?"

"Never," I spat, angry that he would even suggest such a thing. "I am here to end this. Once and for all."

“End this?” his eyebrows raised, a mock innocent look on his face. “But it has only just begun. Join us and we can show you so much more than you could have ever dre—”

“No,” I snapped cutting him off. “No more talking. This ends now.” I forced a full glamour onto my hand, causing my nails to grow and sharpen. “Blood of like blood, my heart to yours, return to the realm from which you came and dwell here no longer.” My voice resounded through the air, my hand poised and ready to swipe the sharpened claw along my palm.

The creature that had been Dorian’s eyes filled with panic at my words, but then they fell to my hands where I was about to cut my palm open and smiled. “Very well. We accept.”

I frowned, confusion etching my face. “You accept? You can’t accept I haven’t cut my hand yet. The blood hasn’t been paid.”

They laughed, the sound of it echoing out into the Between. “Oh, but you have. Blood has been spilled and we accept.”

Horror filled me, and in what seemed like slow motion, my eyes fell to my hands where they were still drenched in Chess’ blood. My eyes flew back up to the creature that Dorian had become, their laughter grew as they began to glow and ripple.

I spun on my heel and shot for the tear that led back to the Willow. My feet didn’t seem to move fast enough, and I wished for once that I could transform into an owl like Dorian. To move faster, to be stronger.

Before my feet even hit the dirt I knew I was too late. The hole was back and only getting bigger, but still I searched out where I had left Chess. My eyes took in the now empty blood covered spot on the ground and I couldn’t breathe.

Chess was gone.



Chapter 20

The Aftermath

I SPENT THE first month after the ordeal in a stupor, refusing to see anyone and only leaving my room long enough to find another bottle of alcohol to try to numb myself. But it never worked. Nothing did.

Mab's warning to me before I had given my magic to Chess had not been severe enough. If I had known it would be this painful, this gut wrenching emptiness that made each day seem like torture, I probably still would have gone through with it. I just would have given Chess more shit about it. I definitely wouldn't have let him out of my sight.

After the first month, Alice had come into my room, wrinkled her nose in disgust, and demanded I get out of bed. I promptly threw her out with a little magic and created a barrier of vines over the entrance. I quickly realized I hadn't thought that one through when I had to remove the vines not more than ten minutes later to relieve my bladder.

That's when she pounced.

"Shit!" I cried out, still sitting on top of the toilet. I leaned forward, grabbing the towel off the rack to cover up and glared at her. "What the fuck, ever heard of privacy?"

Alice stuck her nose in the air and looked down on me with as much haughtiness as a queen. "Not when you are hurting yourself and those around you."

"How am I hurting anyone?" I questioned, flushing the toilet and wiggling my pants up my legs while trying to stay covered with the towel. "I've been in my room this whole time. No way to hurt anyone in there. Not anymore." My throat clogged up at my words, and I forced the guilt back. I needed more alcohol.

"You also aren't helping anyone." Alice stepped in front of the bathroom door, her arms crossed over her dress shirt, tapping her partly covered heel on the tile floor.

"So? I did my job there's nothing left to do." I shrugged, turning instead to wash my hands. I chanced a glance in the mirror and winced. My face was pale and I had bags under my eyes. My hair looked like a rat had

started a nest in it from not seeing a brush in over a month. Not that it mattered. Nothing mattered anymore.

Alice huffed at my answer, irritation pinching her face. “You think just because the Shadows are gone people don’t need you? What about Mop and Trip? They’ve come by every day asking for you, and I have to turn them away, because you are acting like a selfish child.”

Anger prickled in me at her words. “Selfish? So choosing to give my life to save everyone else, and then to have the love of my life taken from me, is selfish? Asking for just a little time to mourn? You surely need to rethink the definition of the word.”

Her face fell at my words and pity filled her eyes. “But you haven’t mourned. You’ve done nothing but numb yourself with drink. You barely eat. From the circles under your eyes, I doubt you get any sleep.” She placed a hand on my arm and gave it a squeeze. “I know you miss him. We miss him too, and I can’t imagine what you are going through—”

“That’s right you can’t. So stop trying to.” I jerked my arm away from her and pushed my way into the hallway.

Hurried footsteps followed me, and Alice’s voice continued, “But there are things that have to be finished. Holes that need patching up.” Her words came out quickly as she chased me into the kitchen. “The first step to healing yourself is to start by healing others.”

“Where’d you hear that an AA brochure.” I snorted, opening the fridge and frowned at the lack of alcohol inside.

“You won’t find any of that vile drink. I threw it all out.”

I glared at her and slammed the door to the fridge shut. “Fine. I’ll go buy some more.”

“Can’t.” she gave me a smug grin before I could even reach for my keys.

“And why not?” my hands balled up into fists, the anger I had before flaring up into rage. Magic prickled along my skin, and I almost smirked when Alice gave a wary step back before she straightened her spine and stared me down.

“I called your mother and had her take it. I told her I didn’t trust you to not hurt yourself in the state you are in right now. So she took it away.” She fluttered a hand in the air.

“Since when are you and my mom such pals?” I snarled, not really believing she would call my mother on me.

A small smile crept up her face and a gleam filled her eyes. “Oh, you would be surprised what kind of friends you can make when you have something in common.”

“And what would that be? Manicures? Charity?” I scoffed and turned toward the back door. It was dark outside; a quick glance at the clock showed it was after seven. What day of the week was it? I didn’t even know what month it was anymore.

“You,” Alice said simply, moving up beside me.

“Why do you even care?” I sighed, my anger slipping out of me easily. I was just so tired.

“Because there is still disarray in the Underground and a whole slew of Fae who do not want to go back. Because there is a tear in the middle of the UnSeelie Court that we can’t fix. And maybe, because you are my friend.” Slipping an arm around my waist, Alice drew me out the back door and into the garden.

Moonlight shone down in the back yard covering everything with a gray film. The air smelled different, clearer. But I guess being stuck in a room with the same stagnant air for over a month would make anything smell better.

I let Alice lead me through the garden and through the trees. I didn’t know where we were going. I didn’t ask and Alice didn’t offer. We just kept walking until we began to walk through a familiar clearing and the babble of water reached my ears.

My eyes landed on the pond and hidden alcove that had brought me to the Underground in the first place, I stopped. “Why did you bring me here?”

She gestured in front of her with a small sad smile. “To mourn.”

I followed the direction her arm was pointing. There was a new addition to the surrounding foliage. A willow tree that I knew for certain hadn’t been there before stood tall and proud a little ways away from the pond. I stepped toward it and then my feet moved on their own until I was running.

My heart racing in my chest, I shoved the hanging vines aside and made my way to the base of the tree. I fell to my knees before a throne, identical to the one that had been at the base of Chess’ willow, vibrant purple vines and all. At the foot of the throne were bouquets of flowers, someone’s teddy bear, candles, and other items.

I had worried that after the Shadows were gone nobody but me would care that Chess was gone. That they would think good riddance and move on with their lives. Seeing these things in honor of him brought tears to my eyes. Once the tears started, I couldn't stop them.

I wailed and beat the ground. I cursed God for taking him from me. Most of all I cursed myself for letting it happen.

The entire time I cried, Alice stood by my side. Not speaking. Not offering a hug or a hand. Just waiting. Like she knew I wouldn't accept it even if she offered. Which I wouldn't have. I pretended it was because I was too strong for that, but it was really because the moment anyone gave me comfort, I clung to it and had a hard time bringing myself back together.

After a while, my sobs finally ebbed, and she knelt beside me. "We didn't have a ceremony, well, because it would be silly when there was no body to bury, but we just let people come as they wanted to. No judgment, no pressure." She gave a small laugh. "You'd be surprised by how many showed up that first day and how often some come by just to tell him about their day. Mop particularly."

"Mop?" I jerked my head up at the sound of the brownie's name. "How is he?"

"Oh, he is getting by like we all are, but they miss you." A forlorn expression covered her face. "We all do."

"I know." I ducked my head in shame. "It's hard, you know? Without him. Not just because he is gone, even though it is partly that, but when he left, it felt like a part of me left with him. A piece that is still out there somewhere. It tugs at my heart and keeps me up at night."

"Mab said this would happen. Maybe she knows a way to make it not as bad?" she turned her head to the side in thought.

"Maybe," I murmured.

I stared up at the throne. My mind meshing my memory and the scene before me, making it seem like Chess was still sitting there on his throne with one leg thrown over the side and a crop stick playing between his fingers as he smiled boyishly. My heart clenched at the sight, and I shook my head to be rid of the image.

"Should we head back?" Alice started to stand from the ground, but I placed a hand on her arm.

"Would it be okay if we just sat here for a while?" I wasn't ready to go back yet. Alice had been right when she said I needed to mourn, but more

than anything, I needed to be outside. What better place than to do both of those things than at the feet of a hero? Because that is what Chess was. Not a waste of space. Not an unwanted. Not even a half-breed. He was a hero, even if he wasn't just mine.

Alice grinned at me and knelt back down. "Of course, as long as you need."

It turned out I needed more time than I thought. I ended up falling asleep at the base of the tree. When I awoke, there was a blanket thrown over me and a few of the candles had been lit. In the dim morning light, I saw there was a note next to me from Alice.

Was called back to the house. Take as much time as you need, I'll come check on you in the morning.

— A

Standing from the ground, I picked the blanket up into my arms. I walked up to the throne and rubbed my hand along the arm of the chair. I took one last look at the shrine the citizens of the Underground had built for him, and for the first time in over a month, I walked back to the house with a smile on my face and a song in my heart. And this one was for Chess.



Epilogue

Cheshire

MY HANDS POUNDED on the glass as I watched Kat run a hand over her face. She was pale and had dark purple circles under her eyes. Her hair was a mess, but to me, she had never looked more beautiful. Now if only I could get her to hear me.

“I do not know why you bother, she can’t hear you.” A smooth and husky voice slithered down my spine that was followed by a pale hand tipped with black nails that clapped me on the shoulder. I fought not to shrug it off, knowing it would only encourage her further.

“I have to try,” I growled, stepping away from one of the many mirrors surrounding me.

The Shadow Realm was not like I had pictured it. While it was dark, it was more of a permanent night than complete darkness. There was even a ball of light that hung from the sky. I was thankful for that light a little more every day. With Morgana here, there was no telling what would happen if I was left in the dark with no way to see her advances.

“You can try all you like, it won’t make a difference. Though, I think it’s cute how dedicated you are to reaching your love.” Morgana’s pouty red lip opened up wide as she laughed, and I tried not to shiver at the sound.

I moved away from where she stood, her long, blood red gown enveloped her like a one size too small glove, causing her chest to be dangerously close to spilling out. At one time I would have gladly accepted her advances, would even have encouraged it, but after meeting Katherine, everything changed.

She didn’t see me as a half-breed or even as the Moderator. She didn’t damn me or fear me for my powers, she accepted me. Even before she knew she was the princess. Being apart from her was more torture than the Shadow Realm could ever be.

When I had first arrived, it was Morgana who had found me passed out and leaning against a dead log. She had taken me to her home and taken care of my wound until I was well enough to get around on my own. If I had known that taking her help would mean that I owed her my affection in

return, I would have rather rotted out there with the log. Instead, I was forced to have her as my constant shadow as I maneuvered the nightmare realm.

At first, I had wondered why it was called that when there wasn't anything nightmarish about it at all. Perpetual night? All right, not a problem. No plant life or trickling streams. That would have been a problem had I not been Fae. I wouldn't starve for a very long time. I planned to be out of here before that happened. Last but not least, was the annoying woman who would not take no for an answer. While that was unpleasant it wasn't exactly nightmarish.

What was a nightmare were the mirrors. They were everywhere. Every step I took I ran into a mirror that showed me people and places I knew. I could see them, hear them, but they couldn't see me. I'd been trying for weeks to get through to someone, anyone, but they never responded. Never even acted like they noticed anything different.

I had thought Kat would be different. We were connected. She would surely hear me. But since I got here, where I would have normally felt her was just a gaping hole of nothingness. Each day that passed with no response, it seemed to grow bigger and bigger. Maybe one day it would get big enough to swallow me up. Then at least I would be put out of my misery.

Shaking my head at the depressing thought, I moved to the mirror that overlooked her room and waited. I was going to get through to her. If it took days, weeks, or even years. I would get out of here if my name wasn't Cheshire S. Cat!



CHASING SHADOWS



Chapter 1

Kat

THE TWO MEN standing on my doorstep had to be CIA. Or at least cops. If they were trying to pass as civilians they were failing horribly with their matching black suits and black sunglasses. They each had a crew cut, one brown and one blond, and a stern, no nonsense type of expression on their faces. It didn't make the urge to shut the door lessen.

"What can I help you with?" I repeated. When I had first opened the door I'd been in the middle of a call with my mother and already irritated as fuck by her constant need for me to make more appearances for the Fae community. You'd think that having a Fae for a daughter would make her want me to shy away from the public view, but not Sylvia. It just made her even more determined to make the world see the Fae as normal human beings and not alien invaders like the local news was still spouting out.

Easy to say my greeting of "What?" that was practically shouted didn't set well with the cops. So, I had hung up with my mother and apologized for my rudeness. I still didn't let them in, though. Too many reporters lately had dropped by unannounced wanting to get an interview with the Seelie Princess. I still hadn't found out how that got out, but when I found the person responsible they would be wishing to visit the Bandersnatch.

"Miss Nottingham, I am Agent Drake and this is my partner, Agent Walker. We are here on official government business that would be better discussed inside." The blond crew cut said. He put his hands on his hips and there was a slightly uncomfortable grimace on his face. It was the first emotion I had seen on them since I opened the door.

"It's always official business with your type." I gestured a hand up and down at their stuffy suits, not at all feeling underdressed with my sweats and t-shirt that said 'No Talkie Before Coffee.' It was one of my nicer tees, and they were lucky I was wearing clothes at all since it was barely eight a.m.

"Why don't you just make it easier for all of us and just tell me what you want?" I crossed my arms over my chest and waited for them to get to it.

Agent Walker cleared his throat and stepped forward, pulling a piece of paper out of his suit coat. "We have here a letter from the Secretary of Defense, requesting your help in a Fae related matter."

"Fae related matter?" My brow scrunched down as I took the letter from him. It had the official seal of the Secretary, but for all I knew it could be fake. I was an English major and an ex-librarian. Well, hardly an ex-librarian since my career lasted a whole month before I got fired for taking too much time off to deal with Fae drama. When Brandi, my ex-boss and the mean girl of my existence, found out that she had fired the Seelie Princess, she'd had a field day and had wasted no time giving interviews to any reporter that would have her. A tell all about the sadly uneventful life of the human turned fairy princess' life.

At least there wasn't much in my past life as a human to tell all about. I wasn't exactly Miss Popular and preferred to be alone, but Brandi took that and spun it into an intricate tale of high school loner who never quite fit in ends up as the heir to the Seelie kingdom. The press ate it up, and thus, the knocking at my door tripled.

I'd had to get Bar to act as gatekeeper just to keep them off my grandmother's lawn. Since the two men in front of me were on my door step, I made a mental note to check on where the troll was now.

Besides the fact that I was the Fae Princess of the Seelie Court, it didn't exactly make me an expert on official documents. If anything, it would make me less qualified. No matter how much studying I did, my Seelie mother always seemed to be able to pull one over me.

"We can show you our badges if that would help," Agent Walker spouted out, his neutral tone turning to a nervous stutter. So they weren't so nonchalant about being here after all. I forced myself not to grin at the break in their armor.

I frowned at the paper in my hand, the legal jargon not really my area of expertise. I handed it back to them. "You might as well come in. I have no idea what this thing says." I stepped back from the doorway, letting the two into my grandmother's tiny home. I had been living here for about six months now, and she still hadn't returned from her vacation in Florida. She called every once in a while to check in, but every time she seemed happy and seemed to be having the time of her life with no plans to return.

After they came inside, I moved to close the door but not before my eyes swept the front lawn. I frowned. As I thought, Bar was nowhere to be

found. The little setup I had put together for him on the front lawn was still there. A blanket with a variety of toys, no chair because Bar was so big he would break anything I could possibly set out for him. The toys were a bribe, one that I was lucky to have figured out the last time he came by when my Seelie mother had ordered him to capture me. To non-friends, Bar was a big ferocious troll that had the mental capacity of a toddler. His three word sentences were pushing it on a good day.

So, I treated him like any child. Gave him candy and toys to sit in my yard and look intimidating. So far, it'd worked pretty well at keeping unwanted guests off my porch. Seeing as the two, possibly FBI agents, were sitting on my couch, it wasn't going well anymore.

Closing the door behind me, I stepped into the living room and surveyed my visitors. Maybe they were secretly Men In Black? At this point, I wouldn't even be surprised if Will Smith showed up at my doorstep asking for my registration to be on this planet. It would actually make my day. I love me some yummy goodness. Not like anything good was going on in my love life these days, not since...

I swallowed down the lump in my throat that had come from letting my thoughts stray to Chess and shoved the pain deep down. Now wasn't the time to get emotional. There were potentially alien cops in my living room that needed to be dealt with. I could cry later over a pint of Ben and Jerry's.

"So..." I started, sitting in the chair across from the two. Agent Walker seemed more nervous by the minute. He had to be new. "...what's all this about?"

"Well, you see," this time Agent Drake stepped in giving his counterpart a warning glance that made him sit back in his seat a bit like a pouting child, "There has been a particularly large outbreak of Fae refugees coming out of the portals all around America, and it has come to the government's attention that there has to be some way to regulate those who are taking up residence in our fair country. We...I mean the Secretary of Defense was hoping as the Seelie Princess and the..."

"Moderator," Agent Walker supplied earning him a glare from his superior.

"As I said, as the Seelie Princess and the Moderator for your kind on this side, they are hoping that you would be forthcoming in helping compile a list of all the Fae residents who have made a home in this world."

“So, you are wanting to know who is Fae and who isn’t?” I cocked a brow at them.

“Exactly.” Agent Drake nodded his head, seemingly happy that he had explained it right.

“It’s not really hard to tell who is Fae and who isn’t. I don’t know why you need me to help you,” I shrugged, “Besides a few half-bloods, most Fae look exactly like they are supposed to. Otherworldly.” I gave them a pointed look, telling them how silly I found all this. “A brownie looks like a brownie and a pixie a pixie. Hardly a need for a list when you have your own two eyes to judge what is and isn’t Fae.”

Agent Walker cleared his throat; his eyes seemed to be asking permission from his partner to speak. Agent Drake gave a short nod indicating that he had permission.

“What my partner is trying to say is that some of the Fae are not so easily distinguished from humans. While, like you said some are easier to spot, others look more or less human, but a more attractive version. Like Miss Erydesa,” he paused for a moment as if envisioning her, “with her long, gorgeous fountain of golden hair, and her eyes are so blue that sapphires don’t do them justice.” His eyes took on a lusty quality that made me cringe. Gab’s sure knew how to leave an impression.

Before the, still-didn’t-know-if-he-was-a-cop-or-not, could continue on his praise of Gab’s endless perfections, his partner elbowed him in the ribs. He winced and rubbed where he had gotten nudged, his face turning red with embarrassment.

“The problem isn’t that some of the Fae just look like humans. It’s that we aren’t able to regulate them as well as we would like,” Agent Drake paused for a moment, placing his hands together as he leaned forward in his seat, “What we’re asking is for you to make some kind of proclamation telling them to go to a certain place at a certain time so that we may register them as Fae refugees. This will help with policing any Fae who get out of hand and keep our officers safe. They’ll know what they’re going up against when there’s an incident.”

I frowned at the agent. I didn’t feel right about having to do some kind of proclamation that forced my people to out themselves if they didn’t want to be outed by me. It was like saying Irish people had to be registered so the cops would know how to treat them.

I wasn't stupid, I knew exactly what they wanted. Control. They always wanted control over things they didn't understand. But forcing the Fae to register was going too far.

So far they hadn't done anything to provoke the humans. If anything, it was the Fae that should be the ones that were upset. There wasn't a day that I turned on the television that there wasn't a protest or some kind of altercation that ended with a Fae getting hurt. That was usually when the humans were stupid enough to pick on one of the Fae that were bigger than them. I so wasn't about to be part of something like that, government orders or not.

"So say that you get all the Fae registered, what exactly is that going to accomplish? I mean, the Fae that look human could easily use their magic against you before you can even get them close enough to ask for their registration." I crossed my arms over my chest and threw one leg over the other as I leaned back in my chair. "It seems like a waste of time to me."

Agent Drake's face reddened as if he didn't like my answer or that I was questioning what the government had asked. "Now you see here," he shook a finger in my direction, "You Fae came into this world without so much as a lick of thought to any of the humans you were putting in danger, or any of the troubles that you would have caused, or the jobs you're taking by residing in this world. The government has been more than lenient towards your kind, even when you have spread throughout the country and the world without so much as a police force to handle those who get out of hand."

He took a deep breath, the redness of his face deepening with his labored breathing. "You were supposed to go back to where you came from when the danger was over. Instead, you are here, sucking us dry. And if you won't help the problem, you're part of the problem."

He stood to his feet until he was towering over me. I was used to being the smaller person, intimidation tricks like this didn't bother me any. I'd long since gotten over the need to be taller than someone. Being short had its advantages, like being able to kick someone in the nuts without much effort.

Instead of reacting to his provocation with words, the magic beneath my skin crept up to the top, causing a greenish glow to engulf me. The moment Agent Drake saw my magic, the emotion in his eye confirmed what I'd already assumed based on his words.

While he had tried to put on a front about needing to protect the humans and Fae, he really was afraid. Scared of the unknown, of anyone who dared to be called different. It was his kind, the ones unyielding to change that really pushed my buttons.

I was pleasantly surprised though to see Agent Walker didn't seem afraid at all. In fact, his eyes filled with an excited kind of curiosity. Turning my attention back to the raging brunette officer, I let my magic fill me up. My eyes narrowed. I had no doubt that the blue of my eyes had taken on a fluorescent glow. It caused the officer to fall back in his seat, his scent reeking of terror.

"I will only say this once," I tightened my jaw, "Not now, nor will I ever help you register the Fae. I'm on to your game. First, it is registration, and then you round us up to put us in some kind of concentration camp. The president has assured our safety and residency in this country. And until the time comes that our welcome is no longer valid, then this conversation is completely pointless."

My words did nothing to decrease the fear in the agent's face. If anything, it made his fear turn to anger. He took his stance once more, his rage flowing off him in waves. "Now you see here, girly" he started.

I stopped him by getting to my feet and waving my finger in his face.

"No, it is men like you that kept this country from progressing forward, and I want no part in it. You came to my house asking for my help, and then you insult me and my kind?" I gave a haughty laugh that made the brunette flinch. "You're lucky I don't rip you to shreds right here." I clucked my tongue at him, the urge to use my magic becoming overwhelming.

"Is that a threat?" he roared.

"You bet your sorry ass it is," I shot back. "Now get the hell out of my grandmother's house."

The younger agent scrambled to his feet and tried to steer the other agent towards the door. The stubborn ass jerked his arm away, and snarled, "No, I'll leave when I'm good and ready. And that will be when you agree to this order."

"Oh?" I drew out, "it's an order now, is it?" I cocked my head to the side; his words were the last straw in a long list of insults.

"Yes, and as a US citizen you are expected to obey." A mean smile curled up on his face, and it made me only too happy to react.

The magic that had barely been contained in my skin flew out and wrapped around Agent Drake's body. He struggled against it, trying to get some kind of grip, but as his hand went through it, he cursed and screamed at me. The other officer was smart enough to scramble for the door, not waiting to be personally escorted out. Not leaving my spot in the living room, I hurled the officer across the room, out the open door, and slammed it firmly shut behind him.

Releasing my built up magic, I collapsed into my chair with an aggravated sigh. I didn't know why I was surprised. I knew it was bound to happen eventually. I just didn't think it'd be this soon. We were going to have to come to some kind of agreement or all hell was going to break loose. The leash I had on my Fae mother was short at best, and there was only so much that I could do on my own. This was one of those times I really wished Chess were here; he'd know what to do.



Chapter 2

Chess

I SCREAMED AT Kat's reflection in the mirror while pounding my fists against the glass. She was washing her hands in the bathroom, and she didn't even look up at me. With an aggravated cry I slammed my hands down hard against the glass, but it didn't move or crack. It was as if I'd barely hit it at all.

"I don't know why you even bother?" Morgana commented behind me.

My scowl deepened as I stared at the barren floor of the Shadow Realm. Not looking up I said, "What else am I going to do?"

"I don't know, but I have a few ideas." She pressed her body against the side of mine, her ample breasts shoved into my arm that was holding onto the side of the mirror.

Morgana had stopped trying to be subtle the last few months. Compared to the time in Kat's world it felt more like years, and Morgana had spent every waking moment trying to get into my pants. A lesser Fae would have been tempted, and if I was anything, I was a lesser Fae. If she'd caught me a year ago before I had met Kat I would have taken her up on her offer.

Now, that I've known love and melded my magic with Kat's, the thought of touching anyone else disgusts me. Not to forget the gaping hole in my heart that seemed to widen every day we were apart.

"I've told you once and I'll tell you again. Not now or will I ever be with you." I shoved off the glass with my tail wagging in aggravation behind me. I marched out of the mirror graveyard.

I didn't look to see if she would follow. She was the only person that I'd seen since my arrival, and as far as I knew, I was the only company she had. I knew she'd come after me eventually.

The days in the Shadow Realm were always the same. I'd wake up disoriented and for a moment forget where I was. When I remembered the ache in my chest knocks me breathless, and I had to fight to drag in each agonizing breath. Eventually, I am able to move without pain and crawl out of bed.

I pretend to eat the slop that Morgana gives me each morning. The Reaper only knows where she gets the ingredients for it, and then I spend the rest of my day trying to get through one of the mirrors. Every hour just trying to get somebody to see that I'm trapped, that I'm still here. I'm not dead. At least, Morgana says I'm not anyways. It's the one thing I actually believe that comes out of her mouth. The rest was too obscure to even consider. At the end of the day, I would lay down for a night of restless sleep filled with nightmares, only to wake up to do it all over again.

"You should be nicer to me." Morgana slithered up beside me. I didn't have to look to know that the crimson dress she wore almost everyday clung to her like a second skin. It pushed up her breasts until they threatened to come clean out of the top. It was one of her tricks to try and get me to accept her advances. Too bad for her I was more into the subtle sex appeal. Like Kat.

"And why is that?" I asked glancing sideways at her.

She flicked her long black hair over her shoulder with a coy smile. "Because eventually you will get tired of trying to get out, and then you'll want me, and I might not want you then."

I scoffed. "I'll never get tired of trying. I will always try to get out and get back to her." I made my words firm and unyielding, trying to make her believe them as much as myself.

"You say that now, but believe me, it won't last. Do you think I became Queen of the Shadow Realm overnight?" She waved her hands over her form in an exaggerated manner. "I had a family that was waiting for me on the other side too. And no matter how much I tried, no matter how much I screamed and begged, they never knew I was here. They just went on with their lives as if I never existed."

The bitterness in her voice surprised me. She had always acted like she didn't have a care in the world. Well, besides getting me to sleep with her. The whole Queen of the Shadow Realm thing was a joke. Even if it was true, there was no one else here but me and her. The Reaper only knew where the prince had ended up if he was here at all.

"So tell me, Morgana," I tried to not let the disdain I felt for her come through, "What is it that you are here?"

I'd asked her the question before, several times in fact, but she would always give me an evasive answer. Sometimes it was about how she was born here. Another time she had said she had just found her way here or

some other nonsense like that. This was the first time that she had made any mention having a prior life or family back in the Underground.

She stepped in front of my path blocking me from going further. Her hand slid up my chest and tangled in my pale hair. I stood as stiff as a board but didn't push her away as I waited to see if she would answer.

"Just say I rejected the wrong person," she murmured as she pushed up on her tiptoes and tried to press her lips to mine. I turned my face and she kissed the side of my cheek.

"And who would that be?"

"Give me a kiss and I'll tell you." She smirked at me.

"I don't want to know that badly. In fact, I don't really want to know at all." I reached out to remove her arms from around me, but she dropped her arms from around my neck first with a huff.

Morgana pursed her lips then let out a sigh. "Fine. You're no fun."

"Have I ever been?" Inwardly, I was laughing at myself. Cheshire S. Cat wasn't fun? The audacity of it was unimaginable. The fact was that being here had caused me to become a party pooper, rightly killing my former self. I missed it but it was necessary. There were more important things than having fun. Like getting back to Kat.

"If you're going to tell me, no more games."

Her eyes went to my chest where she walked her fingers across the muscles as she said, "You know the Reaper's a nice guy once you get to know him, quite handsome too. Though, he has a nasty temper."

The Reaper? What did he have to do with any of this? Then before I could ask her, I stopped and realized what she had just said. I looked down at her, my eyes widening. "You rejected the Reaper?"

"Everyone makes mistakes." Morgana shrugged one shoulder and turned away from me and walked back towards the place she called home.

It wasn't much more than a hovel. A door shoved into a dirt mound but with nothing else around but the graveyard of mirrors, it was precariously out of place. Where she got any of the stuff to create her home was just as much a mystery as what she fed me every day. For all I knew, she materialized it out of nowhere. Maybe the Reaper was her parts supplier. He was probably the only one who knew why my magic didn't work down here.

I had tried to de-materialize Between Worlds so many times my head ached. I couldn't even get halfway there. When I tried to use it I didn't even

feel the familiar pull at my energy. Either something was stopping my magic, or it simply just wasn't there anymore. Morgana hadn't been very forthcoming with information on that front either.

"If you know the Reaper then where is he?" I waved a hand around us as if he should be in the very place we stood. "Where does he dwell?"

I followed her as she walked into the hovel and then she splayed herself out across the bed and crooked her fingers towards me. "Come lay next to me, and I'll tell you all about it."

The hovel only had one bed. When I had first arrived I had spent painful nights on the floor refusing to share a bed with her, but then after several days of waking up with aches and pains, I relented. At first, she tried her best to come on to me, accidentally brushing my body with her own, pretending she didn't know I was there. Thankfully, when it was clear that I wasn't going to accept her advances, she kept her hands to herself, at least during the night. During the day was a whole different story.

I didn't want to give her any false hopes that I was finally coming around when all I wanted was information. I didn't want to be stuck here forever. If she was withholding information that could help me get out, I was going to get it one way or the other. I was Cheshire S. Cat. When the queen was forcing her Seelie on me I had been the best pretender in all the Underground. I was good at making others think I was interested when really I was just waiting for it to be over so I could get what I wanted. I'd played the game for years; I could do it for a few more minutes. At least to get what I needed, and then I was out of here.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and glanced back at her with a wary stare. "All right, I'm on the bed tell me."

"No, no," Morgana patted the bed next to her, "Lay down, take a load off from screaming and banging at the mirror, you can take a rest for just one day, can't you?"

I let out a frustrated growl as I swung my legs up over the side of the bed and lay next to her, trying to keep as much distance between us as possible. The moment I did, she moved over until the full length of her body was pressed up against my side, making sure I felt every curvature of her form.

"Now isn't that better," she purred, trailing her hand up and down my chest.

My ears twitched as I forced myself not to roll my eyes. "If you say so. Now will you tell me?"

As she settled in against me, as if she were planning to stay a while, she hummed, "I don't know. What were we talking about again?"

"You were telling me where the Reaper lives, but I'm starting to think you don't even know." I moved to get up but her hands were quick to keep me on the bed.

"Don't be so hasty. You know you really should learn to lighten up. When you're stuck down here for eternity, you have to at least try to find some enjoyment in it. Spending every day trying to reach the other side is going to drive you mad."

I gave her a stony glare. In return, she huffed and laid her head against my shoulder. Her hair fanned out around her as she looked up at me from beneath her lashes. "The Reaper really isn't somebody you want to mess with, even if it's to get home. He doesn't take kindly to strangers, especially not Fae."

The fact that the Reaper didn't like strangers was laughable. Wasn't it his job to take souls to the other world? How did he handle his daily job if he couldn't stand people? An introvert forced to interact with others, there was nothing more ironic.

I said to her, "I'll take my chances. How do I get to him?"

"You don't really think I'm going to tell you, do you? As soon as I do, you'll go running off on your own and get yourself killed. You won't last five minutes in this graveyard." She gave a haughty laugh.

"What do you know?" I pushed away from her and off the bed. "You just sit here day after day doing nothing. Did you even try to get out? To get home? Or are you so full of yourself that nobody would want you even if you came back?"

Morgana's eyes narrowed on me as she leaned on her elbows. "You don't know what you're talking about. You don't know who I am or anything about me. And I won't be responsible for your rash decisions."

"Then why bring it up at all," I growled clenching my teeth together, my tail whipping behind me in rapid movements as I tried to restrain my anger.

"Because I'm tired of seeing you pout and scream. You're not the only one here, you know. I've had to listen to your nightmares every night. I haven't slept a decent night's sleep in months," she moved her hands over

her face, her fingers touching the skin beneath her eyes, “I'm starting to get bags. Next thing you know, I'll be all wrinkly. No one's going to even want me and then where will I be?”

“Why won't you help me then?” I snarled, not caring for her whining.

“I didn't say I wasn't going to help you, I just said I wasn't going to tell you where he was. That doesn't mean that I won't show you.” She smoothed her hands down her dress to get the non-existent wrinkles out of it, and then Morgana circled around the bed to the other side of the room.

She opened the door to her closet and started digging around. I stood there with my arms crossed, tapping my foot and patiently waiting until she finally pulled out what she was looking for. She held up some clothing that I had never seen before and then started to disrobe.

I turned my back on her quickly, remembering her game. More than once she had caught me off guard by taking her clothes off at random. Supposedly, she would be itchy or have spilled something on them. I didn't believe it for a second. Where she even got all her clothes from was another wonder of the Shadow Realm. It made me long for my own expansive wardrobe.

“I'm done, you can turn around now.” At her bitter words, I slowly turned around with my hands up over my face to make sure she was actually dressed. I was surprised by how conservative her clothing was. From the moment I arrived here she'd worn plunging necklines and dresses with high slits, but what she was wearing now wouldn't even make a school kid blush.

Wearing brown slacks and low heeled shoes, her forest green long sleeve shirt only had a slight scoop. It hardly showed any cleavage whatsoever. She took her long black hair and pulled it up into a high ponytail so that the ends of it skimmed the back of her neck.

“If I'd known you were going to stare, I would have changed into clothing like this before,” she teased me with a wink.

My lips dipped into a frown as I turned away from her and toward the door.

“Just come on,” I commanded before stopping at the door. When she came up behind me, I swung the door open with a mocking bow. “After you, your highness.”



Chapter 3

Kat

GOING TO CHESS' grave was always hard. Not that visiting a deceased loved one was easy for anyone, but I found it particularly hard since we never got to bury his body.

I used to go every day, now I was lucky to get there once a week. It made me feel guilty for my lack of attendance. The other Fae brought him new flowers and gifts for the vine encased throne. It still sat under the willow tree that was created in his memory. I'd never had to make sure it was cleaned off, because someone was keeping it pristine.

It made me happy to know others cared so much about him but also mad, because it should be my job. I should be the one making sure his grave was cared for. The one who should be by every day just to talk to him. But even I knew that my heart couldn't take it. The times I did come out were hard enough.

Sometimes I would come out here just to talk to him about nothing at all. Whether or not he could actually hear me I didn't know. I would tell him about my day or some crazy thing my mother had done. Sometimes I'd come out here to vent about the things I just couldn't handle. But most the time I came out here when I missed him.

It was usually near the end of the day, when I should be going to bed, but instead I would curl up in a ball on the throne as if just being there made me close to him. I would cry until my throat was raw and my eyes burned. This was one of those times.

I'd been here for at least a couple hours and my sobs had slowly ceased. I stayed here in his throne, my insides calm except for the gaping hole in my chest where he should be.

"I told you it was going to be like this," a deep, sultry voice caused my head to jerk up from the throne, Mab, the UnSeelie Queen, stood before me. Still looking very much the queen in her black on black pantsuit, she scanned the area with her sapphire eyes. They were the same exact shade as her son's. I suddenly remembered that I wasn't the only one who had lost somebody. She'd lost her son.

“What are you doing here?” I asked wiping my face with the back of my hand as I sat up.

“Why visiting the human world. I thought it was all the rage this year.” Her lips twisted into a grim smile, sarcasm dripping from her words.

“Yeah, but I didn't think that you would come. My mother sure hasn't.”

“That's the difference between your mother and I. What kind of queen would I be if most of my citizens were over here and I was in the Underground?” She tutted and shook her head. “I can't very well keep my eye on them in another world.”

Mab wasn't like my mother, Tatiana, the Seelie Queen. She couldn't give a rat's ass about the Fae in the human world as long as they weren't causing trouble in the Underground. Besides, she was too busy trying to find ways around the newly formed Council that was blocking her every move in regards to the Kingdom.

In that way Mab was the better Queen, the better ruler. She didn't overstep her bounds, and she cared more for her people's safety than her own. If the government knew that she was here now they would be scrambling over themselves to capture her. She would be great leverage in getting their little registration thing going.

The fact that they hadn't tried to capture me showed that at least they had some brains in their head when it came to the Fae. They wanted me on their side and knew that taking me would cause uproar. It was pretty ridiculous in my opinion, even though Chess had been the one that had given his life to save them, I was still the one they revered and sometimes to my chagrin, feared.

I suppose it was better for them to fear me than hate me. I hadn't done much in the aspect of things to cause any hatred. I hadn't done much of anything since I'd left. I had pretty much practiced my magic and tried to avoid my mothers'. The human one kept trying to get me more involved with the Fae community while the other one kept trying to call me through the mirror. I had them covered unless I needed them. Last time I had a mirror call from her it hadn't ended so well for either of us.

“But like I was saying,” Mab continued as she walked across the green grass in front of the throne before kneeling down to where the other Fae had laid gifts and flowers, “I told you what you were in for before you gave your magic to that feline. It won't get any better.” She glanced up at me seriousness on her face before she focused her attention back to the ground.

She placed her hand on the ground. A glittery blue energy spread out from it and into the ground, and when she lifted her hand a single white rose lay its place.

"I don't expect it to," I replied to her, my awe of her skill masterfully masked.

"If you say so," she shrugged and then stood from the ground and dusted off her knees, "Now, how are you going to get our boys back?"

My eyebrows scrunched together as I stared at her. "What do you mean get them back? They're dead. There is no getting them back."

"Dead and *dead* are two different things. You sent them back to where they came from, right?"

"Yeah, that's what the spell was supposed to do. Send the Shadows back to where they belong."

"And where exactly do the Shadows belong?" Mab crossed her arms over her chest and waited like a patient teacher. I really wished people would stop asking questions they already knew the answers to. It would be so much easier if they would just tell me what they knew right away instead of making me run around like a chicken with its head cut off trying to figure out on my own.

"Shadows go to the Shadow Realm, and that means they're not dead. They're just..." she fluttered her hand in the air, "...misplaced."

I stared in disbelief, "Misplaced? Is that what you call it?"

When I had done the spell given to me by my Seelie mother I'd expected myself to go with the Shadows if I didn't have the strength to keep my feet planted firmly on the ground. It was the Shadow man who had the last laugh, though. Chess' blood had been on my hands when I had cast the spell, making it so that he was the sacrifice instead of myself. The spell had done its job. It got rid of the Shadow man and took Chess with him, leaving me in a devastated state.

I was still trying to get used to the idea that Chess and Dorian were both gone. Dorian and I hadn't exactly seen eye-to-eye at the end, and I had pretty much broken his heart, but I didn't mean I wanted him stuck in the Shadow Realm forever. It wasn't something I would wish on anybody, except the Shadow man since I had sent him there. If Mab thought that I was going to scramble all over myself because she gave me some kind of cryptic message about them not being dead she had another thing coming.

“It's been over six months and we haven't heard anything from either of them. They aren't coming back.” I shook my head and stood from the throne.

“So, you are just going to give up like that? I thought you loved the cat, and at one point you loved my son as well.”

“Yeah, I mean, I did,” I stumbled over my words, trying to make her understand, “But that doesn't make them alive. Just all the more reason why I shouldn't be barking up the wrong tree and getting hope where there's not any. I have enough on my plate with both my mothers' hounding me, and now the government is banging down my door trying to get me to help them with Fae registration.”

“Fae registration?” Mab's lips twisted at the words.

“Yes, some bullshit about wanting to keep track of us so they can regulate the Fae better,” I paused, throwing my hands up in the air, “It's a bunch of political bullshit and a tiny piece of paper.”

“Yes, I can see how that would be a problem. We don't even have anything like that in the Underground. Most of us can tell what the other person is without having to ask, let alone needing to write it down.” She tapped her face with her long blood red nail. “But the fact that they want to register us doesn't bode well. This should be brought up with the council,” she turned to leave but then stopped and looked back at me, “I'm going to go talk to the council about this. Don't forget about what I said. You can get them back, I know you can, you just have to believe it.”

Oh yeah, I believed it. Me and Peter Pan.



AFTER MY LOVELY CONVERSATION with Mab, I hurried back home to find Alice and Hatter snuggling on the couch. The moment they saw me they jumped apart as if struck by lightning. Alice's face turned beet-red and she stared at the floor. Hatter, on the other hand, had a pensive expression on his face like he hadn't been caught red-handed.

“Don't mind me,” I said smirking at them as I made my way across the living room to grab a bottled water from the fridge. “I'm just going to go take a shower.”

Alice called out to me before I could get out of the living room, “Did the queen find you?”

“You knew she was coming?” I placed my hands on my hips and glared at her. “And you didn’t think it was a good idea to warn me?”

She shrugged a shoulder and shot back, “It’s not like it was your mother.”

“Yeah, well, a bit of a heads-up would have been nice. It wasn’t exactly a conversation I wanted to have at Chess’ grave.” I took a drink from my water bottle and then wiped my mouth. “I’m actually glad that the two of you are here. Seeing Mab reminded me that there is still a big gaping hole in the middle of the UnSeelie Court, which can’t be good for anyone.”

“I would imagine not,” Hatter spoke up, “You never know who might wander through and into the Between. The longer it is open the likelihood of you having to go after them rises.”

Sadly, he was right. As the certified savior of the Underground, if someone ended up in the Between because of the mess I left behind when fighting the Shadow man, whether or not I made the mess didn’t matter, I was going to have to go after them.

“Hence my problem,” I pointed at him. “Do either of you know anything about how to go about closing that hole at Chess’ Willow Tree?”

Hatter tapped a finger on his chin; his silver eyes flickered, making them look like liquid steel. When he spoke each word was enunciated perfectly and with precision, “Not that I am aware of. The ability to rip a hole between the worlds is not commonly done. In fact, only a few Fae have ever been able to do such a thing.”

“Oh, oh.” Alice jumped up and down in her seat. She lifted her arm and waved her hand at me. “I bet you Pat is one of those. Don’t you think? He makes the mirrors that go between the worlds and that’s kind of like a hole, right?”

I cocked my head to the side as I thought about her suggestion. The short grumpy man I had met in Summerville did indeed have the power to create portals out of mirrors. I wasn’t sure if that equated to ripping a hole in the fabric of space itself, if that’s what you could call what the Shadow man had done. Not that I had anything against Pat but going to the Seelie Court was not on my list of things to do anytime soon.

“I guess we could ask him. I mean, if anything maybe he knows somebody who could help us. Maybe there is some kind of magical Band-Aid I can use to close the portal back up. Not that it’s really bothering anyone being there at the moment.”

Hatter spoke up at my words, his voice ominous and dark, “The door to the Between is not simply there to monitor our goings and comings. There are things that should stay between.”

That was helpful. I’d only been in the Between a few times, and it hadn’t been pleasant. The only thing I really knew about it was if you went too far away from where the doors stood you might never come back again. I’d almost gone out there once.

The first time that I entered the Between there had been some kind of Dark Shadow that I had tried to go after, but the receptionist, the two-headed bird sisters, had warned me away. Those two still hadn’t shown back up yet, nor had any of the others that had been taken by the Shadow man. We all just assumed that they had gone to the Shadow Realm as well. A lot more people had perished than I would like to admit in my game with the shadows. I couldn’t let it happen again. Having the portal closed would keep us that much safer, so I’d better find a way to close it and fast.

“All right then,” I clapped my hands together having come to a decision, “My shower can wait. I’m going to try and see if I can get a hold of Pat and then go from there. You guys just continue doing whatever it was you were doing before I came into the room,” I waggled my eyebrows suggestively at them causing Alice to blush as she peeked over at Hatter’s form.

The romance between the two seemed to have blossomed overnight. I had always suspected Alice had a thing for Hatter. The last time we visited him at his house they had been holding hands but any other kind of PDA had been kept to a minimum and behind closed doors. I was just waiting for the day that I caught them making out on my couch, so I would finally be able to tease Alice with something, instead of her always getting on my case about my silly human ways.

The door closed behind me as I entered my bedroom. I glanced over to the mirror that I had replaced when my mother had stolen Chess. Thinking about him and how he’d been tortured in the Bandersnatch, caused a stinging pain in my heart.

I promised to never let anything else happen to him again because of me, but apparently, my promises didn’t mean anything. He still got hurt because of me, and now he was lost because of me, and there was nothing I could do about it.

I pulled the sheet off the mirror slowly, half expecting my mother to pop up at any moment. She had been trying for days now to contact me. No doubt for some silly and nonsensical rule she wanted to pass but the council wouldn't let her. Apparently, I had veto power when it came to the council. But if there was something that my mother wanted to be done, and they didn't approve of it, I was pretty sure that I wasn't going to agree either.

I heaved a big sigh when nothing jumped out at me right away, and I moved my hand up the side of the mirror. I pushed my magic into the frame, activating it. The glass rippled and danced for a moment before the reflection of my bedroom changed into a window into Pat's shop.

Mirrors, frames, and other gadgets filled the shelves and floor of the shop. From my own personal experience, I knew that beyond the edges of the mirror it was even more cluttered, and I still had the bruises to prove it.

"Pat," I called out, but no one showed up in front of the mirror. "Are you home?"

There was some banging and pounding off to the side before there was a smash. It was followed by a string of curses. The voice could only belong to one person. Pat.

"I'm coming. Hold on," he shouted from somewhere off to the side of the mirror's edge.

I sat on the bed waiting patiently for him to finish whatever it was that I had interrupted him doing. I didn't have to wait long before his face showed up in the mirror.

"Yeah, what do you want?" He griped as soon as he saw my face. The goggles wrapped around his face pulled his gray hair back. Dirt smudges were smeared across his cheeks and nose from whatever he had been working on. A utility belt with different tools hung around his waist, some of which I had never seen before and some as common as a hammer. The one time I had interacted with Pat had been brief and unpleasant. He had only helped me before because of my father; I could only hope he would still continue to do so now.

"Hey, Pat. Sorry to interrupt you," I started before he cut me off.

"No, you're not. Just tell me what you want. I'm busy."

I didn't like the snarky attitude he was directing toward me when I was trying to be pleasant, which was a huge achievement on my part. So I dropped the nice girl face.

“It might have come to your attention that there's a big ass hole in the middle of the UnSeelie Court about where the moderator lived. Do you know anything about it?”

Pat fiddled with something in his hand, not looking at me as he snapped, “Yeah, what about it?”

“Well, it needs to be closed up before someone gets any smart ideas about going in it. Got any ideas how to do that?”

He looked at me for a moment before he scoffed, “Oh, I get it. Pat here can make mirror portals; he must know all things about portals. Let's go to Pat and bug him, because he has nothing better to do.”

“Well, yeah.” I shrugged being blunt about it.

“Well, you could try reading a book sometime,” he snorted waving the screwdriver he had in his hand at me, “You spent enough time in your library when you were younger, you'd think you would know how to read a book.”

“What are you talking about?” I shook my head at him. “There are no books in the Seelie Library about how to close up holes.” I would know, as he said I spent most of my childhood, and the majority of my adult Fae life in the library. If there was a book in there about closing holes between worlds then I would know about it.

Pat snorted at my response, clearly becoming impatient. “You weren't looking in the right places. Go to the library and look for a book by Phineas Portalus. You'll find what you need.” He pulled his goggles back down over his face with a frown. “Now if you don't mind. I have orders that need to be filled and no more time for you.”

Before I could ask another question the mirror went black and my confused face reflected back at me. Well, that was helpful. Who the heck was Phineas Portalus?



Chapter 4

Chess

THE SHADOW REALM was more than just Morgana's hovel and the graveyard of mirrors. The surrounding areas were dark and full of a dense fog that made it impossible to see where you were walking.

When I first arrived in the Shadow Realm I had woken up in the mirror graveyard with no idea where I was. The ground was cold and covered with dirt. My body had ached from where the Jabberwocky's claws had torn up my side. That's where Morgana found me.

She had taken me to her home and patched me up. I should be grateful to her, but she had made it clear the first day that she was selfish and only had her own interests at heart. She'd only saved me so she wouldn't die of boredom.

The first two days were kind of a blur and filled with a range of emotions. Angry that the Shadow Man had once again tricked us, and then there was the sorrow that had grown stronger every day. It only got worse when I found out about the mirrors.

Wallowing in self-pity, I would spend hours in front of them, hoping for a chance to see Kat. To get her to hear me, but like Morgana had pointed out, she never did.

One day I had wandered away from the mirrors to the edge of the graveyard. There was nothing out there but dense fog, no movement or light. Tired of waiting for the mirrors to get my message through, I had decided it had to be better out there than being stuck in here. I placed a foot into the fog and the moment that I touched it, a chill ran up my spine. The hairs on my arms stood up and a deep, unsettling, nauseating fear pulled at my gut.

I had tried to push the feeling away but it gnawed at me, and then the final straw was a growl off in the distance that had me pulling my foot back to the graveyard. Whether it was magic forcing me to stay here or my own cowardice I didn't know, but I hadn't tried to leave ever since.

Now, Morgana led me out of her house and straight to the edge of the fog. I slowed my pace behind her when I saw where she was going,

apprehension gripping at my throat. Morgana didn't seem to have the same hang-ups as I did. She stepped right up to the edge without a care in the world. Unlike with me, if she felt anything when she stepped in she didn't show it, and once she was fully covered something peculiar happened. The air around her cleared leaving a small area around her clear.

"Are you coming or what?" she called over her shoulder as she stepped further into the darkness.

I hesitated, not wanting to have that sickening feeling again, but then I stuck my foot out into the area that was still clear. When I didn't feel it, I let out the breath I hadn't known I was holding and quickly followed after her.

"Why is it that you can go through the fog?" I asked following close behind her, my eyes darting to the darkness around us. "Doesn't it make you feel..."

"Sick?" she supplied and then shook her head, her ponytail wagging behind her.

"Yes." I ignored the urge to bat the bobbing hair away and asked, "Why aren't you affected by it?"

"Because I belong here and you don't," she stated not supplying me with any more details causing irritation to build in me.

"If I don't belong here then why am I here? Shouldn't there be some kind of person to make sure that kind of thing doesn't happen?" My boots crunched on the ground beneath my feet, the dirt having turned into dried grass. It was sad to admit that the sight of grass, even dead grass, made my heart swell with joy.

"You mean a moderator?" she said with a hint of laughter in her voice. The way she said it made me think that she knew exactly who I was and had been playing with me this whole time.

"Yes, like a moderator." My teeth ground together as I said the words. I could have lashed out at her and asked her what I suspected she knew, but I was trying to get information out of her. Being a cad was not going to win me any points.

"Hmm, well I suppose you can say we have one, but they don't come by often, and it's pretty much up to us to moderate ourselves. Besides, it's not like we have unexpected visitors, like yourself, often."

I grabbed her arm, forcing her to stop and turn to me. "So why then, if you are supposed to be in charge of your own stuff, haven't you helped me get out of here before? Did you just keep me here for your own

amusement? Is this some sort of game to you?” My previous decision to charm her was thrown out the window as my emotions overcame my need for answers.

She didn’t respond the way that I would have thought. She didn’t jerk her arm away from me and claim her status as Queen of the Shadow Realm and she could do what she liked. No, what she did was far worse.

Her lips curled up into a nasty smile, and her eyes glinted with mischief. “All of life’s a game. Only some of us are lucky enough to know who’s playing. Wouldn’t you like to play with me, my little kitty cat?”

The words she spouted back at me were almost the exact words I had said to Kat when we had first met in the UnSeelie Court. How did she know what I said? Instead of asking her, I dropped her arm and snarled, “Not with you. Never with you.”

Shrugging, she turned back toward the invisible path she was leading me down as if our conversation had never happened. “Anyways, you feel fear because that is the way the magic works here. It is supposed to keep those who don’t belong out.”

“So, then where are we going?” Irritation still prickled my voice, but at least she was answering most of my questions. If I lashed out again I had no doubt she wouldn’t have a problem leaving me here.

“You wanted to go to the Reaper, so I am taking you to the Reaper’s. It just so happens the way is through this mess.” She fluttered her hand at the fog around us. Surprisingly, it hadn’t closed in on me as I thought it would, since as she said, I ‘didn’t belong’, but instead kept the area open. Just in case, I tried to keep a close distance between us but not so close she’d get any ideas.

I let her lead me through the fog for a while, our conversation having died off with her last explanation. I figured I’d find out what was going on when we got there and no sooner. Not that it wasn’t eating me up to ask her. Curiosity killed the cat as they say, and this cat wasn’t going to be doing any dying anytime soon. Once was enough.

Eventually, the fog cleared to a large area about the size of Morgana’s place. Also, like hers, there was a mirror graveyard and a hovel like home. Seeing this caused me to wonder if that was the standard for living in the Shadow Realm. Crappy living quarters and mirrors that tortured you with your friends and family being so close but so far away. If there was a hell, I had no doubt I had found it.

“Hello, boys,” Morgana called out with a bit of a singsong voice. Her hips moved in exaggerated movements that reminded me of a slithering snake.

My steps behind her slowed as I watched the door to the hovel open to reveal two men. Exactly identical they had dark brown hair and piercing green eyes. They had well-defined jaws and enough muscles to crush me like a bug. I instantly didn’t like them, or the way they looked at me like I was something they found at the bottom of their shoe.

When they saw Morgana their eyes lit up, and their lips curled into feral grins. Their eyes scanned up and down her form as if they were in the desert and she was the first glass of water they had seen in years. Just the sight of it made me cringe. Apparently, Morgana frequented these fellows often. What they did together I didn’t want to know.

“Morgana,” one of the men said as he came up to her side and wrapped an arm around her waist. The possessive hold he had on her made me think he thought I was competition. I wanted to speak up that he could gladly have her but knew he wouldn’t believe me so I kept my mouth shut.

“Who is your...friend.” His gaze shot to me, accusation in his look. When she threw her head back and laughed, his eyes turned back to the woman in his arms.

“He is hardly a friend, more like an unwelcome prisoner.” She placed her hand on his chest, her eyes sliding over to me giving me a silent warning that I didn’t understand. She let herself be embraced by the man before the other one came up beside her wanting the same welcome. She gladly switched between their arms, not seeming to care how their hands roamed on her form.

“We could take him off your hands if you like,” the other one growled, the threat clear in his voice as he glared at me.

“No, no. I have to take him to the Reaper. He will want to know we have trespassers in any case.” She patted his massive chest and then moved out of his arms. “Cheshire, this is Carban and Coby,” she gestured to each one in turn and then grasped each of their hands with a happy smile, “They are my special friends.”

Special wasn’t all that they were, I was sure, but I didn’t comment and just nodded my head, a playful grin disguising my true thoughts. “Pleasure.”

“Cheshire,” she continued explaining to the men who were completely enamored by her, “is trying to get home to his lady love. He’s been trying for months, you should have seen him, the poor dear.” The pity in her voice made me want to call her out on her lies as she pouted at me. If she had been sad for me any of the time I was stuck at her place she sure had a sorry way of showing it. All she did was taunt me and try to seduce me. Not once had she shown an ounce of sympathy for my plight.

One good thing that came from her mockery was the twins’ faces changed from competitive to empathetic. They nodded their heads as she told my story, the emotion on their face showing they knew exactly how I felt.

“We feel your pain friend,” the one named Carban said, “I am lucky to have been exiled with my brother, Coby. Others like our Morgana here are not so lucky and are stuck alone forever to be haunted by their past lives. I do not know what I would have done had I not had my brother to help me through the lonely times.” He clamped a hand on his brother’s shoulder with a grateful grin, which his brother returned.

“Yes, we are truly blessed,” Coby agreed before turning to Morgana. “Will you dine with us before you head out? Or are you in much of a hurry?”

“Oh, I don’t know. We have a ways to go, and I don’t want to be out here too long. You know what can happen,” Morgana said ominously before she glanced over at me with a sly grin, one that I knew meant we were staying whether I liked it or not. “But I guess we could stay a little while, that is if it’s okay with Cheshire?”

I didn’t dare say no. I might not be the smartest Fae in the Underground, but I wasn’t stupid. If I was the one who said no then the twins would have reason to dislike me, and I needed all the friends I could get if I planned to get home and back to Kat.

So instead of shouting what I wanted to say, I gave them a fanged tooth grin and said, “I would be delighted.”



Chapter 5

Kat

ALICE OFFERED TO come with me to the library, but I declined. For the first time ever I'd be going into the Underground by myself. No Trip or Mop to stand by my side as I ventured through the unknown terrain. No Seer to command the guards to let me pass or to lead me by the hand.

It was frightening and exhilarating at the same time. Like the feeling you get when you are jumping from a high place without a net. You hope you'll be fine. You think you'll be fine, but at the same time, there is a sense of fear that you will be squashed into a pancake on the floor.

Fortunately, I didn't have to go through the Between to get to the Seelie Court. One thing I had been able to convince Pat to do was to make my mirror versatile. He had made it so I could go to any active mirror in the Underground or human world. Which apparently, he told me there were more and more requests for it every day. It was something that I probably should look into later, being the moderator and all. It probably wasn't a good idea to have Fae jumping back and forth across the United States causing mayhem wherever they went. I already had the government on my back; I didn't need any more trouble.

Pat assured me that the mirror would take me straight to the library, and I wouldn't have to go through any of the hallways that might possibly make me run into my mother. I had no fantasies about the fact that I probably wasn't getting in and out of the Library without seeing my mother. I measured the likelihood of not seeing her somewhere between not likely and no way in hell. All I could do was step into the mirror and hope that whatever I encountered I would come out in one piece.

Taking a deep breath I slid my hand across the edge of the frame while thinking about the library that I'd gone to with Alice. It was a large room but smaller than the ballroom. The two floors of it were covered with wall-to-wall bookshelves, full of so many books that it was more than I could count or imagine.

As a child, I used to spend almost all of my time there. Lost in the adventures of the pages before me, I dreamed of the day that I would get to

leave the Seelie Palace. It used to be my safe place, for me and my father. Now, all it did was remind me of the girl I once was and the woman I am now.

I held onto that thought as the mirror rippled and changed. Placing one foot in front of the other, I let the liquid surround me, the feel of it cool against my skin. It didn't take long to get to the other side of the mirror, but for some reason this time the trek was slower than before. Just as I was about to get worried, I heard something.

A voice that I shouldn't be hearing. One that I had only heard in my dreams. The voice of a dead man.

I only heard it once. My name whispered, barely audible, but it was there. I would know that voice anywhere. I stepped out of the mirror and onto the library floor not knowing what to think.

It had been Chess' voice that said my name, clearer than day, and it wasn't likely that I would forget it anytime soon. I couldn't say that it was just my subconscious trying to make me feel better. I couldn't keep making things up to make myself feel better. I told Mab that I was trying to move forward, and that searching for ways to get him back was just a waste of time, but what if I was wrong?

What if Mab had been correct? What if they weren't dead at all and they were just stuck in the Shadow Realm?

I dragged a hand through my blonde hair in frustration. Couldn't things ever be normal? I had enough on my plate; I didn't need my boyfriend haunting me now. Even if it was his voice, and that was a big if, I wouldn't even know how to get to him in the first place.

The only thing I could do was do what I came to do and that included finding the book that Pat had said talked about portals. If I could figure out how to close the hole in the UnSeelie Court to the Between then maybe there would be something in there about the Shadow Realm, like how the hell I was supposed to get there.

My tennis shoes padded against the tiles of the library floor as I walked through the aisles searching for the section that could possibly have the book Pat had talked about. Phineas Portalus had been the name that he had said, but I had no idea what section I was supposed to look in. As far as I knew, there wasn't a section on portals or about ripping holes in space and time. This wasn't an episode of Doctor Who.

I hadn't been looking long before the voice I dreaded sounded in my ears. "You won't find what you are looking for in here."

Inwardly groaning, I put the book back on the shelf I had been looking at and turned while saying, "Hello, Mother."

My mother, Tatiana, Queen of the Seelie Court, stood at the end of the aisle. Considering her need for attention her outfit today was pretty tame. White pressed pants and a matching suit jacket; the only thing that made me remember this was the Seelie Queen I was dealing with was the lack of clothing beneath the jacket. It was held closed by a tiny bejeweled button, which thankfully kept me from seeing far more of my mother than I wished.

Looking at her made me self-conscious about my own clothing. I wore jeans that had seen better days and a t-shirt that read 'Evil Beware, We Have Waffles'. My ensemble was topped off with beat up tennis shoes. I felt like a street urchin compared to her.

The pinching of her lips told me she wasn't any happier to see me than I was to see her. Which was funny since she hadn't stopped hounding me to talk to her the last few months. If one thing my human and Fae mother had in common it was their persistence to annoy me to death.

"I wasn't expecting you to come in person. I had just sent the message not two hours ago." She crossed her arms over her chest, her brows bunched together in her confusion.

"Message? What message?"

"The one telling you that if you don't contact me, I would be forced to take matters into my own hands, and by that I mean take your friends into my own hands." Her eyes narrowed when I didn't show any recollection of what she was talking about. "Please tell me you received my message? I do so hate to waste a good threat."

"Sorry," I shrugged, "But I'm actually not here for you."

"Really?" her scowl transformed into a curious look that caused her to look younger than she actually was. "Then what, pray tell, are you here wandering the library for? You cannot be homesick already; you wanted to stay in the human world so badly."

The sarcasm in her voice wasn't lost on me, but I chose for once to be the bigger person and ignore her. Instead, I gestured to the books and said, "I'm looking for a way to close the hole to the Between, can't have some unsuspecting Fae wandering in by accident."

“How...noble of you.” The way she said it made me feel like she thought less of me for caring, which knowing her, it probably was a fate worse than death.

“Yeah, well, some of us think of others before ourselves. Not something you would likely do on purpose.” My mother wasn’t a horribly evil person. I had on occasion caught her in a moment of humanity where she couldn’t hide how much she cared behind her icy front. Today sadly was not one of those days.

“I care plenty,” she waved me off, “I cared enough to come greet you in person rather than sending the guards to apprehend you.”

“And why would they do that?”

A slow smile crept up her face that made me want to shiver, but I forced the urge back as she said, “Because you are trespassing of course, and trespassers are killed on sight.”

I scoffed at her thinly veiled threat. She didn’t want to hurt me; I was the only thing keeping the Council from completely taking her power away from her. If she took me out of the equation then she would be powerless, and there were too many Fae out there with a grudge against her to let that happen.

“You think you are protected because I need you?” she snarled and grabbed my wrist as I picked up another book pretending she didn’t bother me. “I made you; I can unmake you just as easily.”

I glared at her for a moment and then sighed as I dropped my hand. “Can we stop with the soap opera drama, please? I have things to do and places to be. Just tell me what it is you want?”

Her expression was so befuddled by my words I almost thought she hadn’t heard me, but then she let go of my wrist and smoothed her hands over her top. “Fine. I wish to go to the human world and the council refuses to let me leave the palace.”

“Why would you want to do that?” I couldn’t help but laugh.

“The majority of the Fae community has seen fit to live there it is only befitting that I know what they are dealing with.”

“Why do you even care? They are out of your hair and somebody else’s problem. And by somebody else, I mean me.” I turned my attention to scan the shelves once more. It had to be here somewhere.

“That doesn’t matter,” she said dismissively, “What matters is...what are you looking for?” the tone of her voice made me think she was going to

stomp her foot like a child.

“A book by Phineas Portalus and it does matter,” I glanced at her from the corner of my eye, “You in the human world would be a disaster. Not to mention, the press would have a field day, and the government is already on my back about Fae registration, they don’t need more ammunition to use against us.”

“Of all the ridiculous...Fae registration! Really, who do they think they are?” The queen’s voice rose until it echoed in the library. “We are immortal and powerful, we don’t have to answer to the likes of them. This just proves my point that I should go to the human world and set them straight.”

I shook my head furiously. “No, no. Absolutely not. The reason they want to register us is for that very reason. They are afraid of us.”

“They should be! What are they compared to us? Insects in the grand scheme of things. They should be bowing to us not the other way around.”

“That thinking is precisely my point. You go in there demanding things and they will rise up against us. They have weapons you couldn’t even dream of.” I knew the humans well, if we tried to take over their land, or make them bow down to us in any way, they would be all over us like a football player at an all you can eat buffet.

“So what? We have magic,” she growled, her magic crackling around her, “Their puny metal and plastic cannot compare.”

“Not if they drop a nuke on us,” I muttered and then said to her, “Look. I have enough to worry about right now without having to babysit you in the human world. Let me deal with this hole first, and then I will talk to the council about it.”

At my words, she visibly relaxed. Her face smoothed out and her magic settled back inside of her. “Do you promise?” the uncertainty in her words made me almost guilty that I didn’t have any intentions of going to the council, if anything I would tell them to lock her in her room to keep her here. The last thing the human world needed was more Faes, and the Seelie Queen was the Fae of all Faes. Everything they hated about us was solidified into one being and her being there would get us crucified.

Guilt or not, I controlled my scent so she couldn’t pick up on my emotions and said, “I promise.”

“All right. What were you looking for again?”

I turned back to the shelf so she couldn’t see the relief on my face. “A book by Phineas Portalus, supposedly it will tell me how to close the hole.”

“Like I said before, you won’t find it here.”

Huffing an aggravated breath, I spun on her. “Then where is it?”

“Nowhere.”

“What do you mean nowhere?”

“Precisely what I said, nowhere.” She clucked her tongue at me and then continued, “As in it doesn’t exist anymore. I got rid of it a long time ago.”

“Why would you do that?” I snarled at her, tired of being here already.

“Oh, don’t get so huffy. I couldn’t very well let it exist and have someone getting ideas about opening portals between our worlds when I was trying to keep everyone out, now could I?” she shook her head as if I was being silly to even ask.

“Then how the hell am I supposed to close the hole the Shadow man made? It can’t just stay there forever. I could just imagine it now, some poor creature would go in thinking it’s a great vacation spot and then they wouldn’t come back out again.”

“I hardly doubt that will be the case, but I can tell you just as easily how to close it as the book would. Dry reading that is.” She stared down at her nails with a bored expression on her face.

“Then why didn’t you say so in the first place?” I practically shouted at her, my own magic built up in me and began to crackle along my skin.

“You never asked.”



Chapter 6

Kat

ONE OF THE first things I had done when Alice had decided to stay in the human world for good was to get her a cell phone. It had been amusing as hell to teach her how to use it. The fact that she could take pictures of herself, message people through text messaging, or even video chat with others was mind-blowing for her. For someone who was used to magic, it was hilarious to see her befuddled expression as she tried to work the device.

Later I regretted it.

She was worse than a teenage girl—always on her phone, texting or taking selfies. She had even figured out how to make a social media profile and had helped a bunch of other Fae get up to date on the human world as well.

“If we want them to accept us as humans we have to act like humans,” she had stated when I complained about her phone usage. The phone bill was through the roof, and since she wasn’t getting any income, it was all coming out of my pocket. Or rather my parent’s pocket. I really did need to talk to someone about getting paid for being the moderator. Even Chess had been getting paid, even if it was through unconventional means.

Surprising even to me there was enough reception in the Underground for me to make a phone call. With Alice on the up and ups of electronic devices, it was easy enough to call her up before I left the library to tell her to meet me at Chess’ house. That’s why when I stepped through the mirror from the library and onto the purple shag rug of Chess’ home; I was surprised that she hadn’t made it here yet.

While I waited, I took in the home of my deceased lover. I had only been here once before. Back before I knew who I really was, when everything was new and exciting. Back then, I had been wary of the cat-like human and his flirtatious ways. I would never have thought back then that I would be standing here the way I am now. Or that when I did it would be alone.

My eyes burned at the thought, and I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat. I forced my feet to move forward to check out the rest of the house. As far as I knew, no one else had been here, but I wanted to be sure no one was squatting in it or desecrating his home.

I cringed at the pink and purple colored furniture as I walked around the living area. The decor still made me feel like a unicorn had barfed all over the place. I guess it was a good thing he was gone, because I knew that there would be some fighting if we had ever gotten a place together. No way in hell would pink ever be on the color pallet.

Moving from the living area, I walked into his bedroom where the door had been thrown open by the shadows. The door still lay open and against the wall, it's hinges barely holding on. I chewed on my lip as I moved further into the room.

I let my hand trail along the comforter on Chess' bed. One that I had never slept in and never would. I picked up his pillow and pressed it to my nose, inhaling deeply. It smelled like him. The hole in my chest ached, and I had the sudden urge to roll around in the bed to engulf myself in his scent.

Before, I could do it, Alice's voice called out, "Lady? Are you here?"

Clearing my throat and placing the pillow back where it belonged, I called back, "I'm in here."

Alice appeared in the doorway with Hatter in tow. Her eyes scanned over me, worry pinching her face. The look in her expression silently asked me if I was all right. All I could do was nod my head as I stepped away from the bed.

"Let's get this over with."

After my mother decided to test my restraint with her dodgy answers, she had finally told me what I needed to know to close the hole. Apparently, it was like any other kind of magic, except that I wouldn't be able to do it alone. The strain on my own magic would be enough that it could kill me, so I would need a conduit to help me focus the power on the task at hand. That was where Alice and Hatter came in. They would act as my hands to help keep the magic in check while I shoved as much force as I could at the sides of the hole. It would be a long and tedious process, but it could be done.

How the hell the Shadow man had done it so easily was beyond my comprehension. Then again, most of the stuff I knew about the shadows was wrong. I wouldn't be surprised to find out that they had survived and

were in the Shadow Realm just waiting for their chance to break free once more. Which was all the more reason I needed to figure out how to close the hole so I could get to the Shadow Realm and finish what I started.

“So, this is going to suck,” I started as I led them through Chess’ home and out of the willow tree.

We stood before the hole, the white of the Between almost blinding in contrast to the rest of the area. Alice stood on one side of me and Hatter on the other. Taking a deep breath, I tried to settle the nerves that had begun to inch up my spine.

“What do you wish of us?” Hatter asked. His gray eyes looked at Alice and then back to me. If he was as nervous as I was he didn’t show it. Alice, on the other hand, wrung her hands in front of her not able to hide her feelings as well as her lover.

“I need you guys to help me control my magic while I force the hole to close,” I gestured to the edges of the hole in question, “I have enough power to do it on my own but without a buffer of some sort I could get caught up in the magic and drain myself dry.”

“It sounds pretty dangerous. Are we sure we want to do this?” Alice asked. Her face filled with apprehension.

Did I want to do it? No. Did I have a choice? Not really. The hole needed to be closed before someone got hurt, and no one else besides Chess and I had enough power to close it. My mother probably could have done it, even Mab, but it would have drained them so much that they wouldn’t have recovered. Thus the half-breed had to do it. Wasn’t it always that way?

“It’ll be fine,” I said to Alice, though I could tell by the look she gave me that she knew I was full of shit. I only said things like it’ll be fine when I didn’t want her to worry, but there wasn’t anything I could say to make her feel better. It had to be done, and we were the ones to do it.

“Very well,” she sighed and then asked, “What should we do?”

“Just stand there for now. I’m not exactly sure how this will work. In theory, when I start using my magic to close it you need to use your magic to keep mine on target.” I explained and then added, “If I start looking like I’m going to go over to the dark side knock me on my ass, got it?”

“With pleasure,” Alice replied a bit too happily. The glee in her eyes at the prospect of hitting me was disturbing at best. It made me wonder what kind of person I was living with. Maybe it was time for some roommate therapy.

“Just follow his lead,” I pointed to Hatter who I trusted more than Alice not to get me killed. I shook my hands and focused my attention on the hole and then asked, “Ready?”

“As we’ll ever be,” Hatter’s solemn voice replied followed by Alice’s gleeful, “Ready!”

“All right, here we go.” Even as I said the words my magic began to build up inside me.

It was happy to have a job, joyful even. It had been kept under lock and key too long. In the last six months, there hadn’t really been any need for it. The shadows were gone, and I didn’t have to use my glamour anymore. Daily activities usually included being a buffer between other Fae and dodging my mothers’. I didn’t get a lot of time to practice, nor did I need to use it for household chores. I will admit; I did use it to get the remote when I was too much of a couch potato to get it, but other than that it had been very much kept dormant.

The magic almost knocked me off my feet as it rushed to the surface, and even Alice and Hatter’s eyes widened a bit at the force of it. I quickly grabbed a hold of it with my hands, mentally stopping it from flying forward without a purpose. I then directed the magic toward the hole.

In my mind I was taking hold of the edges of the opening, pulling it inward as I imagined what the space should look like with it gone. Thinking about the hole being gone didn’t make it so, my magic fought against me, not wanting to do as I asked. I pushed against it, my actual hands coming up in front of me as I tried to push the edges closed.

Beads of sweat dripped down my face and the effort of it made me think that I still needed to join a gym. The muscles in my arms bunched up and burned at the strain the magic was causing as it whipped around in front of us all carefree and defiant. It was like bench-pressing a truck. A truck with a mind of its own and it was saying no way in hell was it touching that hole.

“What’s wrong?” Alice finally asked after a few moments. “Why isn’t it working?”

“It’s being a pissing little shit is what it is,” I bit out between clenched teeth. “It’s pissed I haven’t used it in a while and making me work for it.”

“What can we do?” Hatter asked from the corner of my eye.

What could they do? I watched my magic as it swirled and jerked, trying to move any direction but forward. What I needed was a sheep dog

that would keep it on the right path, but I would have to settle for the two Fae next to me.

“Use your magic to create a barrier on each side,” I started, straining to talk as I fought with my own powers. “This way it will have no choice but to go where I want it to go.”

“It shall be so,” Hatter answered, his eyes turned to liquid steel as he became focused. He held his hands out on either side of him for what I could only assume was to call his magic, because moments later silver white energy began to flicker along his palms and wrists. His eyes locked with Alice’s who had been standing there in awe. “Your turn, dear.”

Alice blushed and slowly lifted her hands as well. With more effort than it seemed to take Hatter, Alice concentrated on something off in the distance. Her brow scrunched down, but nothing happened for a moment. Then as if something clicked, a pale blue energy glowed on her palms. Her eyes lit up as she glanced down at the light and then back to Hatter and me.

“I did it!” she cried out with such happiness it made me worry.

“Have you never manifested your magic before?” I asked, trying to keep my focus on the task at hand but worried about her experience in the matter.

“No,” she shrugged, “I haven’t had the need to, but do not worry, I as the humans say, got this.”

My lips pursed at her confidence, not trusting her abilities. Unfortunately, it was too little too late. I didn’t have a choice in who helped me, because the magic I had called had to go somewhere and it sure as hell wasn’t going back inside of me.

“Fine, follow his lead and no funny business.” I nodded to Hatter, the strain of my magic causing my words to sound breathless.

Hatter nodded at Alice and gave her a reassuring smile. “Just watch me.”

He lifted his hands until his palms were facing toward where my magic was doing a silly dance regardless of my effort to contain it. Hatter forced the glowing energy from his hands to create a barrier, forcing the green tendrils of magic to move away from his side and come at Alice full force.

She cried out as she quickly put her hands up as well, her magic shoved at mine. Her side wasn’t as solid as Hatter’s though, and it poked at her trying to find some way out. Thankfully, her barrier held up as well as

Hatter's, so it was easy for me to push the magic forward and into the sides of the hole.

Inch by agonizing inch, the hole moved slightly inward, causing Alice to yip, "It's working, Lady! Look!"

"I can see that," I bit out as I struggled to make the hole smaller. Each inch was a battle in itself, and I could feel it in every muscle of my body. Using so much magic, while tiring, was an exhilarating rush. Each pump of magic I pushed out of myself took its place, making me feel full of power. *Invincible.*

The moment the word came to mind I shook my head. No. I couldn't think like that. I had to get this hole closed.

Whenever I became high on magic it meant I was getting close to my limit. The magic wanted to keep going, even if it meant draining my well dry and using my life force in its place. My magic was a double-edged sword. While it could help me in many ways it could also kill me just as easily. Probably why I didn't use it as much as it would like me too.

Finally, the last inch was closed, and I cut my magic off with a sound snap. It fizzled out having lost its purpose but not before lashing out at me and landing me square on my ass.



Chapter 7

Kat

I DON'T KNOW how space travelers do it. Opening and closing portals between worlds was not easy work.

By the time we got the hole closed my entire body was sticky with sweat from the effort. My whole body ached, and I felt as if I had just run a marathon on one foot. Something that I wouldn't do even if I had ten legs. Running should only be done when someone was chasing you, or when there was a sale on my favorite midnight snack. But not in any circumstance was it done for fun.

"I don't know about you guys," I started bending at the waist as I heaved in in a few breaths. "But I am going to take a hot bath and call it a night."

I turned from the newly closed hole and started back toward the willow, but Alice stopped me with a touch of her hand. In achingly slow motion, I turned my head to raise an eyebrow at her. Ugh. Even that hurt.

"I was wondering," Alice started, her face quickly turning red as she glanced down at the ground and then peeked over her shoulder to where Hatter stood waiting. "If you could maybe..."

One thing most people learn about me quickly was that I was not a pleasant person on the best of days, and when I was tired and disgusting, I had no patience for anyone. So it took all my effort not to shout at Alice for her dallying and to tell her to spit it out already.

"If I could what?"

She shuffled her feet and looked at the ground again, the shy and uncertain Fae was not a side I was used to seeing. She seemed to gather her courage and quickly said, "If you could stay at Chess' tonight so I can be alone with Hatter?"

If I hadn't been listening very closely I would have missed it. Her words came out altogether before she took in a heaving breath and waited for me to answer, anxiety making her form stiff.

Thinking about it for a moment, I didn't know what to say. I mean, I'd had a roommate before; it wasn't uncalled for to ask to have a little privacy

with your loved one. A little play action without interruption but what Alice was suggesting wasn't something I had ever planned to do.

"Why can't you go back to his place?" I peered around her to peek at Hatter who seemed to be pretending to not be listening in on our conversation.

"Well, you see the thing is," she giggled wringing her hands nervously. "Hatter kind of has a full house at the moment. There are plenty of Fae who have come over to the human world and those who have gone home to their families. But there are some who have lost family members to the shadows, and they are too scared to go back home, so they have kind of congregated at Hatter's. Making it not really the ideal place to...well you know." She gave me a knowing look.

"Fine. Then I'll just go stay at my mom's," I said moving toward the willow again before her voice stopped me again. "What now?" I spun on my heel and snapped at her.

"I think, I mean," she glanced back to Hatter, "we think it would be good for you, to stay at Chess' place." Alice walked up to me placing her hands on my shoulders. "Don't pretend like we haven't noticed you dragging through life. You don't sleep well, and the only time you visit Chess' grave is when you can't stand the ache you feel in here." She poked the middle of my chest where the hole pulsated at the mention of it.

"I don't know what you are talking about," I muttered looking away from her and to the ground. "I'm fine."

"The heart is not so easily healed or so easily hidden away just because we wish it to be so." My eyes darted over to where Hatter stood, his arms over his chest as he nodded solemnly. I didn't know what to say. His words rang true for me but at the same time, I didn't want to admit them, especially since I had just recently heard Chess' voice when passing through the mirror. I suspected mentioning it now would not do my case any good.

"Why don't you stay here tonight?" Alice suggested again. "It might do you some good. Help you to move on."

"You know Mab says they aren't really dead." I couldn't help but bring up. I wasn't the only one who couldn't let go and try as I might to move on, the damn cat kept bringing me back in.

Alice pursed her lips not happy with my words. "She's a grieving mother. Of course she would hold on just as much as you would, but

Lady...Katherine,” she shook her head sadly her blonde hair whipping around her, “they’re gone. They aren’t coming back, no matter how much you want it. So why don’t you take a bath and have a good cry and then in the morning you will feel better. I promise.” She gave me an encouraging smile that I only half returned.

“If you say so.”

“I know so.”



AFTER ALICE AND HATTER left to have their little night in, I waited around outside of the willow. I was delaying the inevitable, I knew that, but going back in there was too hard for me to handle after I used so much energy. Happily in denial, I moved over to Chess’ original throne, the vines on it were wilted and dried, unlike the beautiful ones that had covered it the first time I had been here. Things had changed so much since then.

It was hard to believe not even a year ago I was a smart mouthed human thinking I knew everything while making my way through what I thought was Wonderland. Now, here I was a half-blood and the Seelie Princess to boot. I scrubbed a hand over my face and let out a bitter laugh. All I had wanted back then was to get home and away from that perverted cat, and now I would give anything to have him here again. Maybe Alice was right. I needed to surround myself with Chess’ stuff so I could finally let him go.

Not able to convince myself to delay any longer, I moved toward the entry to the willow tree. Placing my hand on the bark, I let myself be enveloped in the magic of the tree. Stepping through the bark and onto the lush unicorn barf carpet, I let out a deep sigh. I wondered if he had any food around here, and if so, was it any good anymore?

I maneuvered around Chess’ house searching for the kitchen and something to fill my empty stomach. Who knew closing tears between worlds would make one so hungry? I’d have to remember that for the next time it happened. I just hoped there wasn’t a next time.

As luck would have it there was some food still in the kitchen. Some weird prepackaged food that didn’t have an expiration date but was similar enough to chips that I decided to chance it.

Lounging on one of the fur covered chairs; I munched on my snack and tried not to go cross-eyed from the decor. What exactly was I supposed to do now? It wasn't like he had a television set or any books that I could see. How exactly did he stay entertained here?

The last thought made me pause. Oh yeah. I frowned hard. I had forgotten what Chess' extracurricular activities included before he met me. Before he became my Chess he was little more than a man whore, taking on male and female Fae alike as payment for his service to the crown. Just thinking about it made me sick to my stomach.

My eyes moved toward the bedroom door where the bed was visible from my seat. Had he taken them there? How many had he had in his bed? A large lump filled my throat and I fought to swallow it as I shook my head. No. Don't think like that. I didn't want to remember him as a certifiable prostitute. He wasn't like that with me. He was funny and kind. Even when he was supposed to be working for my mother he had always put my wants and needs first. It was one of the reasons I had fallen for him so easily.

Dusting my hands off, I stood from the chair and moved to the bedroom. Bypassing the bed with a sideways glance, I beelined it for the bathroom. I opened the door and closed it behind me; even though I was the only one here I still didn't want to take any chances. People could still come and go as they pleased here. The last thing I wanted was to be caught naked by a stranger; it was bad enough Alice didn't understand the meaning of the word privacy.

As soon as the door was closed behind me, my eyes went straight to the claw foot tub. I let out a longing sigh. Chess had a bathtub I could only dream about. The one at my grandmother's house was a standard tub that barely let me fill it up enough to cover my boobs and that was only if I was laying down flat. This tub, though, I could easily sit up on the side and have a nice luxurious bath fully covered and all. Just the thought of it made me relax a bit.

Wasting no time at all, I quickly stripped off my sweaty clothing and turned the water on. Once it was good and full I stepped in and sank down until I was covered to my neck. God, why hadn't I done this before? The freaking cat had been holding out on me.

Thinking of Chess made me wish he were here now. He would know how to make this bath worthwhile. My face and chest heated up at all the things he would do to me if he were here now. I sighed deeply and sank

even further into the tub. Look at me. I was supposed to be getting over Chess and moving on but everything here just made me think of him and thus miss him even more. Maybe this was a bad idea.

I climbed out of the tub and wrapped a towel around myself and then grabbed another to dry my hair. I couldn't even enjoy soaking in the tub. I pulled out my cell phone to see that I had almost no battery left and no bars. So much for having some form of entertainment.

I growled in frustration, and I stared at myself in the mirror. What was I supposed to do now? It was too early to go to bed, but after the day I had, it wouldn't hurt to call it a night already. Besides, the sooner I went to bed the sooner I could get out of here and go home.

Marching into the bedroom, I started for the closet. Chess and I weren't even close to the same size, but he had to have something I could wear. I so wasn't putting my sweaty clothes back on.

Opening the closet door, I smiled slightly at the sight before me. Who had or needed so many clothes? I swore he was worse than my sister. I could count on one hand how many pairs of shoes I had and he had at least two dozen. Not to mention, all the different pants and tops he had organized by color. Even dead I was learning things about him. I wouldn't have pegged him for OCD. Giggling, I thumbed through his clothing. The whole closet smelled of him, a sort of spicy scent that filled my nose and made my heart ache.

Not able to stand to be in here for one moment longer, I grabbed the first shirt I found and darted out of the room. I looked down at what I had grabbed, a sheer crop top that wouldn't cover half of my bust let alone work as a nightshirt. Shaking my head, I went back into the closet, this time taking the time to grab a half decent shirt.

Walking out of the closet, I pulled the tank top over my head. If Chess was still alive, and I somehow magically got him back, we were going to have to talk about what regular everyday clothing looked like. While looking at him prance around in tight pants and chest-baring shirts was enjoyable, it wasn't really good for functioning in the human world.

I moved over to the bed and hesitated. Placing my hand on the top of the comforter, I frowned. Just a few hours ago I had been thinking how I would never lay in this bed but now here I was getting ready to slip underneath the covers. Trying not to think about it too much, I climbed beneath the comforter and laid my head back onto the pillow. I turned over

and buried my face into the pillow. I could smell the cat here too. With the pillow clutched close to my face, I fell into a restless sleep, staring twins and a dark haired woman with way too much makeup on.



Chapter 8

Chess

ON THE POSITIVE side, dinner with the twins wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. They kept the conversation light and mainly spent the whole time flirting with Morgana, an attraction I couldn't understand. Did they not know how atrocious she was?

Thankfully, the dinner didn't last long and we were on the move again. I was surprised I didn't have to let my claws out when it was time to leave. The twins had begged us to stay the night, and when I say us, I mean her. They couldn't give two licks about me.

Morgana, though, laughed them off with a promise to stay on the way back after she got rid of her extra baggage. She looked to me as she said it, and I had the childish urge to stick my tongue out at her. I resisted the urge and waited like a patient dog for her to lead on.

Walking through the fog had become more of an inconvenience now. I followed after her, not too worried about where we were going or how we got there. I just wanted to get to the Reaper and get home. The more questions I asked the longer it would take, and I didn't have any desire to stay longer than I already had.

"You are being awfully quiet back there," Morgana finally broke the silence between us. "I would think you'd be talking off my ear now that we don't have the twins to intimidate you."

I scoffed, "They don't bother me."

"Really?" she glanced over her shoulder, quirking an eyebrow. "That's not what I got from how tense you were at dinner."

"Can you blame me for wanting to get a move on? The more time we waste with your lovers the longer it will take me to get out of here."

"Jealous?"

"Hardly," I laughed.

Morgana made a humph sound and turned back around, putting her nose in the air. After that, we went back to silence, which I preferred, to be honest. I liked someone who gave me a challenge and could hold their own as much as the next fellow but after a while it just got tiring.

“Here we are,” she said when she finally stopped to talk to me again. We exited the fog and entered another mirror graveyard like area, practically identical to hers and the twins, it didn’t make me feel any closer to getting to the Reaper and out of here.

“Is the Reaper here?” I asked moving around her to scan the area. I didn’t see anything that could be remotely what we were looking for and spun back around to wait for her answer.

“No, not here.” She smiled up at me expectantly as if there was a joke I was supposed to be in on.

“Then what are we here for?” I growled at her but all she did was giggle and point a finger behind me.

“Him.”

I hadn't seen my dad in centuries. He looked exactly how I remembered him.

He was an large cat about the size of a tiger with fur stripped like mine, a pink base with purple stripes. He had huge emerald green eyes and a face full of sharp teeth. Lounging on top of the rock, his tail wrapped around his hind legs, moving up and down with interest.

For a moment I thought he wouldn't recognize me. I'd been nothing more than a boy when he died. Would he recognize me as a man?

Morgana sashayed right over to him without a care in the world. It was strange how even though she was wearing casual clothing she still moved as if she were dressed in fine satin and jewels. It was the kind of attitude that came from growing up in royalty. It made me wonder exactly who she really was.

“Cheshire,” she purred, her hand coming out to stroke the top of my father’s head. I half expected him to growl and nip at her, but he angled his head further into her hand, silently requesting a scratch. Granting his request, her fingers dug into the fur behind his ears, causing the large feline to purr with contentment.

After a few moments, I was beginning to feel awkward. The scratching had gone on longer than was appropriate in polite society and made me wonder if they knew each other better than they appeared.

I cleared my throat causing Morgana’s hand to stop and my father’s eyes to open. The look in his eyes had he been one with physical magic would have decimated me on the spot. Luckily for me, I got my ability to

phase between the realms from him. It was the only true power he had besides his massive size.

“As weird as this is turning out to be, could you stop with the petting and explain to me why we are here?” I gestured around the hovel like area, not much different than Morgana’s, except his mirror graveyard only held a few mirrors as opposed to the dozen or so that filled Morgana’s.

“Always the petulant child. I see after all these centuries you have not changed,” my father’s voice boomed out of his chest.

Shrugging, I gave him my best fang-toothed grin. “What can I say, I take after my father.” Even as the words fell from my lips I knew they were only partly true.

There were many things about myself that had nothing to do with my father. Things that I hoped hadn’t come from my mother. The fact that I could easily let myself be convinced to make Kat fall for me for the queen’s plan. Or the fact that I had been so cowardice and unable to tell her no when she kept forcing her people onto me. Now that I knew what real love felt like, I felt that my father never loved me, and if my mother even had a chance to be with me, she probably hadn’t either.

“Like father like son,” Morgana laughed, the back of her hand covering her mouth, “I knew bringing you here would be interesting.”

“Is that all this is for you? A new source of entertainment?” I growled at her, the smirk on her face at my outrage caused my anger to quicken. “I trusted you to lead me to the Reaper not drag me all over the Shadow Realm so you can get your kicks off my family drama. And you,” I pointed a clawed finger at my father, “you are a shape shifter, why must you stay in animal form? You know how that makes me feel!”

My father cocked his head to the side, curiosity in his gaze, and then he nodded his head. “I apologize. I did not realize at your age you still had insecurities about your form.”

Troll malarkey. He knew well and good I still had hang ups on my form. As half UnSeelie and half Seelie, I didn’t have the full powers of either parent. While my mother had been able to transport from one place to the other with a single thought, so much so she could go between worlds. I, on the other hand, could only go small distances and only if I had been there before. My father as he so dutifully pointed out could shapeshift between a large cat form and a Fae form that he used to mate with my mother. He told me once that he preferred the cat form because it was

simpler; his mind didn't have to focus on things he couldn't control as much. I used to envy him but after a while, I realized I would never be like him. Always stuck in between forms, I began to resent it.

I tried not to let my interest show but as usual when he shapeshifted my eyes were drawn to his form. His whole body enveloped in light, his form shrank down from the massive cat into that of a man. The fur on his skin receded, his jaw shortened and his paws lengthened into hands and feet. Long, dark purple hair hung from his head and brushed the ground below. The only part of him giving anyone any clue of what he once was were the sharpened canines in his mouth and claws on his hands. Unlike me, he didn't have ears on his head but pointed human ears, something else I would never achieve without glamour.

Unfortunately, with his transformation also came the lack of clothing, something that Morgana had no problem with as her eyes trailed my father's figure with a hunger I'd never seen on her face. I wasn't a prude by any means but seeing her watch my father that way made me a bit queasy.

"Clothing please," I croaked out as he stood to his full height, showing off that I did indeed gain some attributes from him. His lips twisted downward as he walked into the hovel near us.

"Well, this certainly is interesting," Morgana murmured, her eyes on the door my father had just exited. I didn't answer her and turned away to look at the mirrors around us. I was curious to see if they showed the same as Morgana's or if it was different for each person. If it was specific to each person's past, then I was curious to know why the mirrors in Morgana's area showed Kat's house.

Kneeling down by a mirror close to me, I placed my hand on the surface. This one rippled and stirred and before long the reflection was no longer showing me and the darkness behind, but the inside of my bedroom. Frowning hard, I removed my hand from it. I moved to another mirror and touched it as well, this time it showed me my bathroom and in the reflection was Kat.

"Kat! Katherine!" I cried out gripping the edges of the mirror as my eyes widened. What was she doing in my bathroom? She had just been home not too long ago. The mirror only allowed me to see her from her collarbone and up, since she had bare shoulders and dripping hair I could only assume she had just gotten out of my bath. The thought of her in my home warmed my heart but at the same time made me ache to be home. I

wanted to be the one to show her around. Before she had only been there long enough to change and then she had to take off before the shadows got her. The aspect of having her in my bed was too much for me to contemplate.

Before my thoughts could wander into even more dangerous territory so close to Morgana and my father, she leaned in close to the mirror as if she was looking right at me.

"I'm here. I'm right here." I shook the mirror's frame and growled out in frustration when she simply dried her hair and then moved out of the frame. Throwing myself away from the mirror, I collapsed in a huff on the ground. She was in the Underground that should mean I had a better chance to get a hold of her, but it didn't seem like it was going to happen.

"Is that your mate?" my father's voice sounded from behind me, but I didn't look up at him as I stared hard at the ground. When I didn't answer he kept talking, the guy was as bad as I was when it came to taking a hint. "She is very pretty."

Morgana made a disgusted noise in the back of her throat that caused me to glare at her, daring her to say something bad about Kat. I might be stuck here, but I wasn't about to let her dishonor my woman. At my intense glare, she promptly closed her mouth and turned her eyes from me. Smart woman.

"Your mother was pretty like that," my father continued as if I wasn't ignoring him.

"I wouldn't know." I wrapped my arms around my knees laying my cheek on the top of one knee. "Kat is my mate, or she would be if I wasn't stuck here."

From the corner of my eye I saw him nod his head before sitting down on the ground beside me. He had found some clothing, thankfully. A plain pair of pants and dark tunic. Not something I would have ever picked but it was better than having to stare at his genitals the entire time.

"You know, prior to what you may believe, your mother and I weren't forced into mating." My head jerked up as he spoke, suspicion on my face. "Your mother was quite beautiful, and I was young and naive. All I wanted to do was rut and your mother was prime for the taking."

My face twisted in disgust at the imagery, but I waited for him to continue whatever it was he seemed to need to say to me.

“It was only by luck that we fell in love.” There was a soft smile on his face as he talked about her that I had never seen before.

“So, what happened? Why did you two break up and then leave me?” I couldn’t help the words that flew from my mouth. I had the chance to ask all the questions I had ever wanted to say, and the child that wanted his parents needed the answers.

“What always happens in the Underground,” my father sighed when I gave him a confused look, “the queen got involved.”

Ah, yes. The Seelie Queen was a right bitch, and it wasn’t at all surprising that she had ruined not just her own daughter’s life but all those around her. I really hoped Kat gave her a harsh punishment for her crimes.

“In any case, I know what you are going through.” He patted me on the arm in a fatherly gesture he had never shown me in my childhood. “I still feel like a piece of me is missing now that I’m stuck here and she is the Reaper only knows where.”

I shook his hand off. “But it’s not like there is a piece of me missing, there *is* a piece of me missing.”

“I know it must feel like it but after a while, it won’t be so bad,” he tried to reason with me, but I stood to my feet.

“No, it’s you who doesn’t understand. We are linked by magic. I was thrown to the Bandersnatch and she saved me. Our magic, her magic is inside of me and each day we are apart it’s like I’m dying inside.” I gripped my chest where the hole in my heart sat, just talking about it made my throat clog up with emotion.

My father’s eyes widened at my story and even Morgana’s mouth dropped open in surprise. “I’m sorry,” he shook his head sadly, his hair swinging around him, “I wasn’t aware. I’ve heard of Fae who have shared magic before but never have I met someone who knew what it was like. Being here must be more than torture for you.”

“You can’t even imagine.”

There was an awkward silence for a few moments; my father’s gaze stared hard at the mirrors around us. Then without warning, he slapped his thighs and stood to his feet. “Well, then we have to get you out of here.”

“How are we going to do that?” I followed behind him as he moved from where we had been sitting to the mirror that had shown me Kat in the bathroom. My eyes traced his every movement as he pressed his hand to the mirror’s surface. This time the mirror didn’t show the bathroom but

somewhere I had only seen once before. It was a place that I kept pushed far to the back of my mind because if I thought too much about it I would run screaming into the night and never regain my sanity.

The Bandersnatch.

The image was blurry, but I could vaguely make out the form of a crouched woman, curled up into a ball against a wall. Her body shook as her arms gripped her knees tightly to her face. The faces that taunted and tormented me were circling around her giving her her daily dose of guilt and dismay. The woman glanced up briefly as if she could tell we were watching her and my breathing froze.

“Is that?” I started and my father traced the surface with his hand, a sad expression on his face.

“Your mother? Yes.” He sighed and removed his hand turning back to me. “The mirrors show you what you want to see most. I watched you grow up even as you were twisted up in the queen’s lies. I’d rather watch your life than watch her suffer, though it pains me to do so.”

I wanted to tell him I knew where she was but even if I could get out of here and get to her, there was no telling what kind of condition she’d be in. Kat had barely been able to bring me back to normal after only being there for a few days let alone the years my mother had been in there being feasted on by the Bandersnatch. Telling him would only make him suffer more.

“Not to be insensitive, but what does this have to do with me getting out of here?” I walked over to his side staring at the reflection of us side by side. Father and son. Both separated from their loves, both broken beyond repair. It was a sad state we were in.

This time my father’s lips curved into a smile as he clasped me on the shoulder. “We, my son, are going to get a message to your mate. If she was able to share her magic with you, then you are connected, and she will be able to find you.”

Sending a message to Kat seemed too good to be true. Even if we could pull it off I worried whether or not she would believe it was from me and not a trick. Could Kat put aside her grief long enough to figure it out?



Chapter 9

Kat

I AWOKE FROM my dream with a jerk. The twins I had been dreaming about had quickly morphed into a laughing cat as big as a house. Its large paws swiping out at me had tossed me from the dream.

I rubbed my eyes with the palm of my hand before peeking out at the darkened room. A quick glance at my, somehow miraculously not dead phone, told me it was just after one a.m. and I should not be awake. But something had caused it and if I knew anything about the Underground, it was usually best to follow the warning.

Slipping out of bed, I padded across the floor and into the bathroom. I covered my mouth as I started to yawn but then promptly choked.

The mirror in the bathroom, that shouldn't have still been fogged up from the bath I had taken hours ago, was covered with a white film. It wasn't the lack of heat in the room causing it that worried me it was what was written there in the fog.

Kitten.

In loopy letters that could only belong to one person. I shook my head and rubbed eyes once more. I had to be dreaming. That was it. I was still in bed and this was all a dream. It's happened before why shouldn't it happen again?

A stinging pain radiated through my arms as I pinched myself. I looked back to the mirror. Nope, it was still there. As clear as day. One word that I knew without a doubt had come from Cheshire S. Cat.

He was the only one with the balls to call me kitten. The only one that I allowed to give me such ridiculous pet names. And the only one who would leave a message on the mirror in his own home for me to find.

Inching closer to the mirror, I peered into the surface. Though fogged over from the nonexistent steam, it wasn't hard to tell that there was nothing in the mirror but my own smeared reflection. Reaching up, I swiped my hand across the surface, half of me upset that I had destroyed his message, but the other part more anxious to see what was hidden.

Unfortunately, there wasn't anything more to see. The only thing looking back at me was my wide-eyed exhausted face. Frowning, I placed my hand on the frame of the mirror hoping that it might be connected like the rest.

When nothing happened after a few moments, I dropped my hand to my side with a frustrated huff. Chewing on my bottom lip, I furrowed my brows while staring hard at the mirror, trying to think of a way to show myself some kind of sign that I wasn't crazy. That Chess really was trying to get through to me.

Realization dawned on me. The mirror might not be connected on this side. For how pervy Chess was it was pretty hilarious that he didn't want anyone peeping in on him while he was bathing. Not that I could blame him, his kind of tub was meant for relaxation, not naughty fun time. Though, if Chess was here I wouldn't exactly tell him no.

The thought of calling Pat to activate the mirror seemed like a bad idea. He wasn't exactly helpful these days, even though he had pointed me to the book on portals. But something inside of me told me I was barking up the wrong Fae.

I shouldn't need his help anyways. Was I the Seelie Princess, or wasn't I? I was supposed to be all powerful, right? That meant I shouldn't need his help. I should be able to do it myself. That's if I didn't kill myself in the process.

Shaking the nerves out of my hands, I drew my shoulders back and placed my hands on either side of the mirror. Closing my eyes, I dug deep inside for my magic and coaxed it awake. It responded lazily and aggravated. It wasn't happy that I wanted to use it again after exerting so much energy on closing the hole. I mentally apologized, hoping it would feel my desperation to get through the mirror.

It seemed to think on it for a moment but then consented and came to the surface. I took the magic and focused it on the frame of the mirror, envisioning Chess. I didn't know where he was, so I couldn't think of the place only him.

I pictured his long pink hair trailing over his shoulders as it brushed his chest. His emerald green eyes that always drew me in and left me breathless. Even that smirk of his that half made me want to hit him and the other half kiss him. All the little things that made up my love for Cheshire S. Cat were funneled into the mirror.

I held my breath as I watched the mirror shake and glow. It had never done that before. Stepping back from the sink, my eyes grew wider and wider until I felt as if they might pop out of their sockets. When the glow faded it wasn't my face looking back at me, but Chess'. Well, Chess and someone that looked so much like him he had to be related.

My heart stopped and my breath caught as I moved slowly toward the mirror. I reached out with my hand. My lip quivered and my eyes burned as my fingers touched the glass surface where his face was. The expression on his face matched mine, a bit in wonder and disbelief but there was one thing on his face that wasn't on mine.

Surprise.

His eyes flickered to where my hand sat on the mirror. He slowly raised his own hand until it lined up with mine. Chess' hand was larger than mine, his fingertips stretching out several inches past where my fingers ended. For a moment, I swore I could feel him. The hole in my chest pulsed and a smile crept up my face as I laughed.

"H...how? How is this possible?" My eyes snapped to his emerald orbs that were just as engulfed with emotion as mine. Then they turned to the man by his side. "You? You did this?" I asked, my gaze following Chess' to the man beside him.

A sad smile was my response and with a shake of his head he said, "No, this is both of you."

"What do you mean?" I locked eyes with Chess once more, the fact that he was actually here before me was still hard to believe.

"You are connected, that is the only way the barrier between the Shadow Realm and your world can work. Two of one heart can do more than even the Reaper himself can conspire."

"So, you are in the Shadow Realm?" I cut in trying to see behind the two images in the mirror to the barren area behind him.

Before either of them could answer, a feminine hand with nails painted as red as blood slipped over Chess' shoulder. The dark haired woman from my dream moved into the frame. She pressed her front firmly against Chess' back. The animalistic urge to rip her off him gnawed at me so strong that it took all my will to not throw myself at the mirror.

"Yes, he has," the woman's deep sultry voice slid out of her mouth. She stroked a hand along Chess' shoulder, her lips curled up in a shit eating grin, "but don't worry I've kept him company so he would not be alone."

I was two seconds away from giving her a bitch please speech when in the blink of an eye Chess shoved her away and out of the frame. Her cries of outrage rang in my ears and I flicked Chess a look.

“Friend of yours?” I cocked my head to the side, lips pursed.

“Hardly.” The complete disdain in his voice when he said the word made me fall for him all over again.

“After all I’ve done for you,” the woman screeched off to the side, which caused Chess to roll his eyes, a move that was something he had to have gotten from me. “I hope the Reaper damns you both, you ungrateful brat.”

“The Reaper?” That was the second time they had mentioned the Reaper in the span of five minutes. The likelihood that it was a coincidence was spotty at best.

“Speaking of the Reaper,” the man that looked so much like Chess it was uncanny said. “He is more than likely on his way now. A hole like this one wouldn’t escape his notice. So, I suggest you say what you have to say and quickly.”

“Who are you?” I started, but Chess cut me off this time.

“He’s my father.” My gaze jerked to his and then back to the man. It all made sense. The coloring, the line of his jaw, even the twinkle in his eye was unmistakably Cheshire S. Cat.

“Your father,” I choked out, the original Cheshire was standing right before me.

The one from the stories of Alice in Wonderland, but this was one version of him that I had never seen before. The Cheshire cat from the stories was exactly that, a cat. But this guy could have been a movie star or runway model. Or some famous cosplayer.

“Yes, and he’s right. We don’t have time to explain everything, no matter how much I’d love to sit here just talking to you, love.” He gave me a fanged-toothed grin that made my heart ache to hold him. “You can get me out, pet. We can be together again.”

I shook my head. “But how? I don’t know how to get to you or where you even are?” I tried once again to make out more of the background but unfortunately, with them standing in the way, I couldn’t make out more than a darkened sky and dirt floors.

“If you are connected as my son has stated then it will lead you to where you need to be.” His words were ominous even while they were

supposed to be hopeful. Yep, he was definitely related to Chess. Riddles were great for party tricks but a map would be more useful.

Before I could ask another question or to even say goodbye both of their heads jerked toward a sound I couldn't hear and then the mirror cleared showing me my own face once more.

"No!" I slammed my hands on the porcelain sink causing it to creak beneath my palms. When the mirror still did not give me the image of Chess back, I reached up and shook the frame as hard as I could, screaming at the top of my lungs but still nothing.

Seething at my lack of response, I reached for my magic and found the well not surprisingly, resistant. I hadn't been very nice with how I used it recently. First with the hole and then the mirror, now it was telling me no more. It didn't surprise me; my magic's personality was as difficult as my own. Which meant I was out of luck and out of ideas.

How the hell was I supposed to find Chess when I didn't know where to start? Chess' father said that if we were connected then it would lead me to them. I could only assume by connected he meant by the magical bond we shared, a bond that had given me nothing but heartache the last six months. One that for once might help me now.

Taking a deep breath in and then letting it out, I tried to calm the torrent of emotion that raged inside of me. If I was going to figure out where the hell I was going I couldn't be dwelling on trying to contact him again.

What I needed to do was find someone who knew more about the Shadow Realm than I did. There were two people who knew more than I did. My mother and Mab. Since one wasn't someone I wanted to talk to, and the other had been trying to persuade me to go after them in the first place, it looked like I was headed for the UnSeelie Palace. I had some groveling to do.

Oh, joy.



Chapter 10

Chess

“YOU REALLY SHOULDN'T have done that.”

I didn't have to look behind me to know who had spoken. The chill that went down my spine, the fear that made its way into my heart was easy enough to pinpoint down the cause.

The Reaper.

There wasn't much information available on the Reaper. Many of the Fae pretended like he didn't even exist. That he was just a made up story meant to scare you into behaving. But I knew the Reaper was very much real.

When I was a child, not much more than a Faeling, I had thought I was big and brave. That I didn't need anyone and could face anything on my own. That was shortly after my father had left me and I was left all on my own.

I'd been warned about the Veil of the Faeries before. That going there would only cause trouble. But I was young and naive. I wanted to see the faeries, and nobody was going to tell me otherwise.

What no one thought to tell me was that the reason people stayed away from the Veil was because that was where the Reaper came to collect the souls of the Fae who had passed on. So, there I was no more than a babe, searching high and low for a faerie to take home with me. But even the faeries weren't stupid enough to come out to play when the reaper visited. I'd had the bad luck of having my adventure on that day.

When the Reaper was in your presence the air grew cold and the hairs on the back of your neck stood at attention. It was like that now, and unlike then I couldn't run home and hide under the covers hoping he wouldn't come for me. No, this time, I had to turn and face him like a man. Because if anyone was getting me out of the Shadow Realm it was him.

“And why is that?” I slowly turned from the mirror to look upon a Fae's worse nightmare. What I saw was pretty disappointing, to be honest.

He had a black billowy cloak that hung around his shoulders, his hood was pushed back to show not a skeletal head or decaying corpse, but that of

a normal man. His long black hair lay across his shoulders and upper chest. His eyes were a dark blue that had I been interested in dating anyone I would have turned on my charm.

But there was something about the Reaper. Something familiar that didn't set right. Whether it was the line of his jaw or the scowl on his lips, I didn't know, but I had met this man before.

"You give her false hope and the Fae need her now. More than you." The Reaper's voice was fluid like silk sheets and harsh like nails at the same time.

"She won't stop looking for me," I stated, putting my nose in the air. "Now that she knows I'm alive. She'll come for me."

"And had you been patient you would have found your own way out but just like the rest of them you are impatient and too wrapped up in your wants and needs to see the bigger picture." His words snapped at me and made me cringe. Shame filled me.

I had only been thinking of myself and getting home. Yes, the hole in my heart hurt. It felt like every second, every breath was pulling at the edges of the hole making it bigger and bigger until I felt like it might swallow me whole. It never did, though.

"It's too late now." I gulped and brushed my hair over my shoulder. I waited for him to scowl at me more, or better yet to kill me on the spot, but he did worse. He took one look at me and threw his head back and laughed.

"So much like your father, you are," he patted me on the shoulder; the feel of it caused a chill to run through me. "Come, let's walk."

I looked to my father who had since changed back to his feline form. A coward if I ever saw one. Morgana stood to the side watching on with amusement in her eyes but also a hint of fear. Interesting.

The Reaper spun on his heel, his cloak sweeping the floor behind him. I hesitated for just a moment; long enough to send a questioning look to my father who gave me a very feline answer, his ears switched. I now knew how Kat felt about those kinds of answers. She referred to them as irritating non-fucking answers.

With no other choice but to stay with the one who had obviously checked out, and the other who I'd already pissed off, or to follow him I quickly caught up to where he was moving into the fog.

Like with Morgana, the fog just seemed to clear for him as she moved through it allowing me to follow after. Did the claims Morgana had to

queendom actually ring true? Or was anyone that was supposed to be here able to move between hovels at will? They were questions that could only be answered by asking them, but I didn't think the Reaper was in much of a giving mood.

"Only the certain few, myself included," the Reaper said out of the blue answering my question. Had he read my mind? "Yes, I did," he answered again and then smirked over his shoulder at me. "A perk of being the Reaper."

"The Reaper?" I cocked my head at him, "so it is a title? Not your name?"

He shook his head. "You should know good and well that names hold power and in my case, the title the Reaper holds more power than something as plain and ordinary as Eugene."

I forced myself not to bust out laughing, though my lips ticked at the name. I shook my head in an effort to cover up my laughter. "I could see how that would be a problem."

"Thus, the Reaper was born." He spread his arms out wide around him making the fog where his arms touched diminish. "Though, I can't take full claim for such a name since I am not the first nor will I be the last Reaper. I am simply surviving my time until another takes my place."

As he finished his explanation the fog dispersed around us, the ground turned from the dead grass I craved to gray stone. He led me along a stone path lined by the first water I had seen since being here that hadn't come out of a faucet. The water was dark except for the swirling tendrils of blue energy moving through it.

A sudden urge to lean down and try to scoop one out came over me. Literally, like a cat with a string, my eyes followed the glowing lights as they came closer and closer to me. They were almost just in reach when a hand clasped down on my shoulder and jerked me back.

My wide eyes locked onto the Reaper's. What just happened? I looked down at where I was standing, just an inch away from the edge, which was two feet farther than I had been before. I didn't even remember moving.

"You don't want to be doing that, trust me." He patted me on the shoulder and continued toward a large stone building. Large columns held up the roof, which had carvings of ancient times that I couldn't quite remember the stories to.

Turning my gaze from the decor, I stared at the Reaper's back. "What just happened? What are those things?"

"Those," he said over his shoulder, gesturing a hand toward the swirling blue lights that even at just a glance coaxed me to come closer. "Are the souls of the dead. If you touch them they'll latch onto and suck you of your magic."

"Wait a moment," I said catching up to him, "I thought this wasn't the afterlife? Morgana said I wasn't dead, but if those are the dead then how am I here? How are any of them here?"

"She's right, in a way," he waved a finger in the air as he talked, "you aren't dead, and the rest aren't really dead either but they," he pointed to the spirits in the water, "are most certainly dead."

"No offense meant, but that didn't exactly answer my question."

He threw his head back and laughed. "No, I suppose it didn't." He made a humming noise, as he seemed to think on what to say next. "You see the Seelie Queen and I have an arrangement of sorts."

I snorted. "I heard all about that, it's the reason the shadows were made in the first place. That arrangement caused more Fae to die in the last year than I'd ever heard of in my whole life."

The Reaper stopped abruptly, and I almost walked into his back before he spun on me. His eyes were electric blue and would have shot a bolt of lightning straight into me had he had the chance.

"You, half-blood, do not know what you speak of. We did what we thought was best for our kind," he hissed at me, his anger palpable in the air. "What you call a lot of Fae would have been much worse had we let those who became the shadows stay in your realm. Count yourself lucky."

With those words he turned away, marching toward the looming building before us. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I had been holding and frowned. There seemed to be more to the story than Kat or I had ever known. His words didn't make the deaths of my fellow Fae any less meaningful, but the fact that it could have been worse than it was caused a shiver down my spine.

"Are you coming?" my eyes shot up to where the Reaper was waiting for me at the steps of the entrance.

"Yes, yes," I called out hurrying my footsteps to catch up to him. "I apologize, it seems that I have been left in the dark on some aspects of our fallen foe."

“As you should be,” he replied before his face fell and his eyes glanced toward the inside, “but not so fallen as you expect.”

I was confused at first by his words but then when what he said made sense in my mind, my heart stopped. What he said couldn't be true. The spell that Kat did that caused me to end up here had worked, hadn't it? But then it had only said it would send the shadows back to where they belonged; it didn't say anything about killing them.

“Where are they?” I asked, my teeth clenched until the muscle in my jaw burned.

“Come, this way.” He opened a large door made of the same stone that the walls and roof were made of, and his arm gestured me inside.

I raised my brow and moved past him and into the building. The floors were stone throughout, the large columns outside also resided on the inside, the only difference was on every column mounted on the wall were torches of blue light. Normally, I would make a joke about him having a thing for blue, but in this case I felt that my comment might be ill-mannered toward someone who had my fate in their hands.

As I walked further into the area that was larger than even the Seelie Queen's ballroom, I felt the distinct presence of the Reaper at my back. Each step I took felt as if I was heading toward something. Something dark and evil, something I never wanted to feel again. Then my eyes landed on the pedestal at the head of the room. My mouth went dry as I took in the form lying on the slab of stone.

The UnSeelie Prince. The last host of the Shadows and Kat's ex-fiancé. If I were smart I would walk out the door and leave whatever was going on with him alone. But call me a masochist, or maybe I had turned into a good guy, but I had an overwhelming urge to find out what would happen to him.

I approached the slab, my eyes roaming over his form. He was still clad in the clothing I had seen him in last: dark pants and an even darker shirt. They were his signature clothing that he thought made him look powerful, but I had always thought it just washed him out. He looked as if he was sleeping, but his skin was deathly pale, the veins underneath his skin pulsed with darkness. A blue power enveloped him in a sort of barrier that I was hesitant to touch.

“It won't hurt you,” the Reaper's voice behind, and much to my chagrin, made me jump. “It is just keeping him in a comatose state.”

“What’s wrong with him?” My eyes stayed on his sleeping form, fear at what he might say filling me.

The Reaper stepped up beside me, his hand hovering over the top of the prince’s glowing form. “Your princess did what she had wished to do, but she did not think of the repercussions her action would have on her dear prince.”

“Then it’s true,” I started, “the shadows are not truly defeated and they still lay exactly where they were when the spell was cast. Inside of the prince.”

“Yes,” the Reaper shook his head, a sadness coming over his face, “an unfortunate side effect. But that is where you come in.”

“Me?” I held my hands up in confusion. “What can I do?”

“If you wish to leave this place you must do what I should have done years ago and destroy the shadows.”

I stepped back from the prince’s body, shaking my head. “Then why don’t you do it now?”

“Because to destroy them you must go into his mind, and he does not know me, but you...” he pointed at me. “You have a connection with him through your lady love. He might just let you in.”

“Why do you even care? If he is stuck like this and the shadows can’t get out then why not just leave him like this?” I gestured a hand at the body. I didn’t want the prince stuck like this, but I wasn’t going to fix something that didn’t need fixing.

“I care, as you ask,” The Reaper turned his gaze from me to the form of the prince, and then said softly, “Because he is my son.”

His son? The UnSeelie Prince was the son of the Reaper? How could that be?

There was nothing in the history books about who had sired the prince. We had never had a king, at least not in my time. Any who might have remembered a time when we had one had never brought it up either. Seer would be the only one that would be forthcoming with such information anyways.

“How is this possible?” I looked to the prince and then to the Reaper, the resemblance between the two now unmistakable.

“Let me tell you a story about a man and the choice between two queens.”



Chapter 11

Kat

AS A HUMAN, I had never been in the UnSeelie Palace. Sure I had been in the garden a few times but never the palace itself.

Unlike the Seelie Queen, the UnSeelie Queen didn't force the decor to be solely focused on white and gold. The palace was covered in an array of colors. Dark purples to bright red. So much so that it almost clashed with each other but somehow it worked.

I made my way up the palace steps and into the main entryway. There, a palace guard started to stop me but took one look at me and quickly changed his guarded stance to a low bow.

"Your highness, we were not expecting you. If you had let us know you were coming we'd have prepared a proper greeting befitting of your station," the guard with copper hair, and a sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of his nose stuttered out, making his pointed ears twitch.

"This isn't an official visit. So don't worry about it." I waved him off walking by him while taking in what had changed since I had last been there.

When I was fully Fae and engaged to Dorian I had visited the palace with him a few times. Mostly for looks rather than actually wanting to be here. We had spent most of our time in his bedroom rather than walking around the palace itself.

The entryway, though, was as I remembered. Large and open, there were glass murals depicting scenes that I had never found out the meaning behind. One of a woman crying by a pool of water that reflected a dark face. Another much like the statue in the garden showing two women, a man, and a tree. Stories that had probably been long before my time and would require another trip to the library to find the answers. Something that wasn't on my to-do list anytime soon.

"Katherine." My attention was pulled from the decor at the sound of Mab's voice. She stood at the top of a grand staircase, her black dress glittering around her as it cascaded along the stairs.

"Sorry to come by unannounced, but I'm here about—"

“Finally,” she cut me off with an impatient smile. “I see you have finally realized what I have been saying all along.”

“Yes,” I started again; a bit perturbed that she cut me off. “I got a message from Chess. He’s in the shadow realm, I saw him briefly through a mirror, but I couldn’t get through to him for more than a few seconds.”

“Of course not,” she scoffed as if what I had said was a known fact. “If the Shadow Realm was so easily accessible everyone would be wanting to visit their loved ones who were banished there.” She gestured with a hand for me to follow her as she moved away from the stairs and down the corridor.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I hurried to catch up with her, my breathing heavy by the time I reached her. “The only way I know into the Shadow Realm is through the door in the Between but since the handle is gone and my magic is currently mad at me, I’m at a loss on how to get to them.”

“The handle is gone because I took it.”

Stopping mid-step, my mouth dropped. “What? You took it? I thought it was my mother to try and hide her dirty work with the shadows.”

Mab gave a half laugh before turning to me. “Everything does not revolve around Tatiana, no matter how much she might think otherwise. I took the door handle long before the shadows became a problem. Long before you were born.”

“So, do you know another way in?”

She gave me a look that was so Dorian that I couldn’t help but smile. Returning my grin with one of her own, she led me through the hallways of the UnSeelie Palace. A sense of nostalgia came over me as we walked down the corridor. The last time I had been here had been with Dorian.

He had broken me out of the Seelie Palace a few months after we had become engaged. Even though I had agreed to the marriage, my mother had still sought to keep me under lock and key. Dorian didn’t understand that, and really neither had I. I still didn’t, to be honest.

Dorian had snuck me out one night. Leading me by the hand, laughing and stopping to kiss me every once in a while, we had run down these halls without a care in the world. Now standing in the very hallway where we had spent so much time, where we had been so in love, I felt guilty.

“So, many memories in these halls,” Mab commented glancing over her shoulder with a knowing smile and then frowned, “they have been too

quiet the last century.”

I wrapped my arms around my midsection, her words making my guilt even worse. Not only had I dumped her son, which caused his spiral that ended in him being in the Shadow Realm, but I had also been the reason she had been alone all this time. The curse my mother had placed on Dorian hadn't just punished him but also punished his mother. It seemed I had a lot to make up for, starting with getting Chess and Dorian out of the Shadow Realm.

Mab walked down the hallway, her steps echoing in the silence we had fallen into. I wondered where we were headed until she started up a winding staircase and then I didn't have to wonder anymore. The door we ended at was that of Mab's own bedroom.

I'd never been in the room myself. The one time I had tried to enter Dorian had warned me away. Something about her liking her privacy or what not. Now I wasn't so sure. I think she just wanted to keep him out.

I waited for Mab to open the door, but she stopped before it with a sweep of her skirts. She folded her hands over each other and leveled her gaze on me.

“What are you waiting for? The longer we stand here and talk the longer God knows what is happening to Chess and your son.”

She waved me off as if my words had no consequence. “They have been there for half a year now, they aren't going anywhere. Besides,” she gave me a secret smile, “I have it on good authority that they are perfectly fine and waiting for your arrival.”

“Then what are we waiting for? Let's go.” I tried to push past her, but she stopped me with her hand.

“Before I show you the way, I have to know.” The way she paused reminded me of those soap operas where the main character was just about to reveal that they weren't who they say they were but their evil twin. It didn't ease the anxiety I had to get Chess and Dorian out, which I suppose was the point.

“What is it?”

“Are you willing to do whatever it takes to get them back? If not then I will not even waste my time leading you into my private domain.” She pressed her hand on the door of her bedroom as if it were a sacred place.

My brows furrowed, and I quickly said, “Yes, of course. That's not even a question.”

“Good, then let us proceed.” Mab turned the knob to her bedroom and opened the door.

As it swung open, my heart lifted in my chest and then sank like a stone. What the hell? I was expecting something like a dominatrix lair or maybe even for her to have a secret obsession with pink frills. Sadly, neither was true. The room was completely ordinary.

She had a four poster bed with dark blue covers. The nightstands on either side of the bed matched the standing wardrobe. The only thing that was out of place from a usual bedroom was a large mirror that took up most of one wall.

Moving into the room, I started for the mirror. One thing I knew about the Underground, everything had to do with mirrors. For the mirror to be here for no other reason than for her to stare at herself all day would be too hard to believe. If she was anything like my mother, the mirror contained something that couldn't be left open to the masses.

“You are a quick one, I give you that.” Mab approached me from behind as I stood before the mirror, her reflection showing with mine. “But then again, your human side has always been the more resourceful one.”

Ignoring her insult to my prior self, I stared into the mirror trying to find some kind of difference. There was no frame on the mirror, so I couldn't activate it like all the rest. If it was the entrance to the Shadow Realm, how did I get inside?

“As you can tell,” she traced her fingertips along the surface of the mirror causing it to ripple beneath her touch. “This mirror is not like the rest.”

“Will it get me into the Shadow Realm?”

“Yes, it's actually the only way in and out left. Even my cousin does not know about this mirror.” Her voice became low and filled with remorse. “It has been my best-kept secret for so long it is hard to share it with anyone. Even to get my precious son back.”

“But why even have it if it is so dangerous?” I gestured a hand at the mirror. “Isn't the Shadow Realm the reason we are in this mess in the first place? I would think that all the portals to it would have been destroyed.”

“They were, except for this one.” A flash of guilt crossed her face and then it dawned on me.

“You're the reason they got out, aren't you?” I pointed an accusatory finger at her. When she winced and didn't deny it, anger filled me, my

magic coming to the surface fully recharged and ready to play. “This is all your fault.”

“Now, now, let’s not be too hasty.” She waved her hands at me as if it would deflect me from unleashing my rage on her.

Everything that had happened to me from Alice’s trick, to my death, to all those who had died since then, had been because of her and this damn mirror. She was lucky I didn’t turn her in on the spot.

“I just have one question.” I held a finger up to her and held back a smile, as she visibly relaxed. At least I knew that even she was scared of me. “What was so important that you would put everyone at risk by keeping this mirror?”

“The very same reason you are willing to go in to save your Cheshire.” Her eyes became misty with emotion. “Love.”

“So, what? Your guy got exiled to the Shadow Realm and because you couldn’t let go and move on, you put everyone in danger?” I understood going to extremes for your loved ones but this was ridiculous. Though, in her place, I couldn’t say I wouldn’t do the same. I still felt the ache in my chest where Chess should be. If given the chance to ease that pain, I might be tempted to break a rule or two.

“Let’s just say I fell for the wrong prince.” She gave a grim smile and then turned back to the mirror. “I am sorry for what happened. That is why I accepted my cousin’s punishment without argument. Now, I wish to make up for my crimes against my son,” she pressed her hand to her mouth with a sob, “he did not deserve any of this, and I fear that his torment is far from over.”

“What do you mean?” I cocked my head to the side. “What’s so horrible about the Shadow Realm? Isn’t it just like dark and barren? I mean, that’s what I saw when I talked to Chess.”

Shaking her head, she placed her hand on the mirror. “There are more dangers in the Shadow Realm than just the shadows themselves. Those who were exiled there still reside in its arms.”

“Okay, so it’s a realm full of convicts. Good to know.” I nodded my head and started to place my hand on the mirror as well but she grabbed it in a tight grip.

“No, they are not simply convicts. While some of those that were sent there did not deserve to be there but were on the wrong side of your mother’s temper, there are others who must be kept there at all costs. They

are dangerous not just to others but also to themselves. You must heed caution before stepping into the Shadow Realm.”

“So, stay away from the convicts and watch out for the big bad. Got it. Anything else?”

“You are not taking this seriously, Katherine.” The way she said my name reminded me of my human mother when she was trying to lecture me on decorum. “You are not simply going to be able to walk in there and walk out with our men like it’s a regular Sunday walk.”

“I know that,” I huffed, “There are dangers untold around every corner. Isn’t that the way it’s been since I stepped foot back in the Underground? Believe me, I took on the shadows. I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“But are you ready to take on the Reaper?” Mab’s questioned, the mention of the Reaper finally getting my attention.

“The Reaper?”

“Yes,” she nodded, “it won’t just be the residents that you will have to watch out for but the Reaper himself. You are going into his domain and he does not take kindly to visitors. Believe me, I know.” That sadness in her eyes came back again.

“I see what you mean.”

“So, are you, Katherine Nottingham, willing to take the chance, that by saving them, you, yourself, may not come back out again?” she shook her head in warning, “And trust me when I say, nobody here would dare try to get you out.”



Chapter 12

Chess

“I WASN’T ALWAYS the Reaper,” Eugene started, turning away from the prince’s form to move off to the side into a darkened area not reached by the torchlight. “The Reaper is not someone who is born into the power. It is passed down from generation to generation and when my time came I did not want to go.”

As he approached the statue, a light flared to life in a bowl next to him. The statue came to life under the glow of the light and what I saw made me gasp. The statue had the exact likeness of the UnSeelie Queen herself. She blinked down at the Reaper and smiled. The smile had so much love and devotion in it that I had a sneaky suspicion that I knew the story he was to tell.

“Do you know how the shadows came to be?” the Reaper asked me, not turning away from the statue of the queen.

“I only know that they were Fae cast out from our world. When they were sent here is when they conformed into the evil thing they are now.” I peeked over at the prince from the corner of my eye as if speaking about them might make him wake.

“I suppose it is best to start at the beginning then so you can understand better.”

“I would appreciate that.” I nodded my head in consensus. The whole picture would be delightful, especially since up until this point Kat and I had only ever gotten bits and pieces of the original story. Knowing the whole of it would make it easier to defeat the shadows once and for all.

“There was once a time when the Fae outnumbered the humans, and as you know, we Fae survive on the dreams of humans, thus making our long-term livability depressing at best. So, the queens came together with their best advisers to figure out how to increase the human population.”

“Many of them wanted to send some of our Fae out into the human world to breed with the humans,” the Reaper paused in his story to give me a lopsided grin, “back then we were quite fertile and could easily fix the imbalance between our two species.”

“But,” I interjected, “that doesn’t make sense. Why would we go mate with humans that would just make more half-bloods, and Fae cannot feed on the dreams of other Fae for very long? So, they would just be making more humans we couldn’t feed on.”

“Ah, but half-bloods dreams are different than a full-blooded Faes dreams. The thing that set the Fae apart from the humans is our inability to work out our issues inside of our minds. It is probably why so many Fae end up being petty and selfish.” He shrugged like it wasn’t really important. “But the majority of half-bloods would inherit the human ability to dream full vivid dreams that are full of wonder and imagination. Things we Fae could never hope to create on our own.” I opened my mouth to point out once more that the dreams of half-bloods were poor substitutes for human dreams, but he cut me off, “Now they were aware this was not a permanent solution. That it would take years for those half-bloods to breed with other humans and thus so on and so forth.” He waved his hand in front of him in a continuous cycle.

“Eventually, the humans would catch up to us in the long run, thus ensuring the survival of our species. The whole of the group was in agreement that this was the best of plans except for one.” The Reaper’s face clouded over with a kind of hatred I had never seen on another Fae’s face. “Moradoc.”

“Who?”

“Of course, you would never have heard of him, since his name has long been erased from our history. An attempt to hide the evil that came from him. Not that it helped.” His hand reached up to stroke the face of the queen’s before he dropped it to his side and turned to me.

“Moradoc believed that mating with the humans was an abomination. That we would sully our line, our magic, by daring to fraternize with what we saw as food. He proposed that we gather the humans up like cattle and force them to procreate so that we may have enough food to go around, as well as the benefit of feeding straight from the source. We all know what can happen when we do that,” he leveled his gaze on me.

Feeding on human dreams from a distance was easy enough and gave plenty of power to any normal Fae. There were some Fae though who only wished to feed directly from the source and that could become a problem. Taking power from the dreams of humans can be tricky and hard to control. It takes a great deal of power to make sure that we only take what we need

without killing the human in the process. Otherwise, the human population would drop and then eventually we would cease to exist. So, doing what this Moradoc guy wanted to do was a huge no-no. Fae have been cast out for less.

“So, as you can imagine they shot down his idea, and that didn’t make him very happy. He deserted his place as an adviser, and they thought they had heard the last of him. The queens’ moved forward with their plan to increase the human populace and for a while, it worked. The human race began to triple in size and became such an overwhelming number that we were no longer in risk of ever running out of food.”

“But while the queens’ celebrated their victory in saving their people, Moradoc was waiting. Biding his time until he could get what he wanted. Moradoc did not simply want to enslave the human race to save our people; he wanted power. He did not want to stay a lowly adviser; he wanted to take over all of the Underground. Combining both sides so that he was the supreme ruler. To do that, though, he needed power. Power, in which, he would not find in the Fae realm.”

“He rallied his supporters and tried to sneak into the human world to take the power he needed to succeed. This was before we had the nice reception area we have now, back then we were able to simply go in and out of our world and into theirs without a Between to stop in. That was created later. The queens’ only learned of his plan as he was making his way into the human world.”

“With Moradoc in captivity, they debated for days and weeks about what to do with him and his supporters. The UnSeelie Queen wished to kill them all, but her cousin, the Seelie Queen, did not want to shed any Fae blood. The Seelie Queen struck a deal with my father, the previous Reaper.”

“He would take Moradoc into the Shadow Realm and keep him there in exchange for one of them to provide an heir for his son, me.” His lips twisted at his explanation. “You can imagine I wasn’t too thrilled to be traded off but when I met the queens’ everything changed.”

“How did you end up with the UnSeelie Queen? I mean, not that I’m complaining, I’ve met the Seelie Queen and of the two I would have chosen the same.” The White Queen as Kat liked to call her was a heartless bitch that had put her own daughter up to be sacrificed to fix her mistakes. If I had the choice between two crazy queens, I would most definitely choose mine.

“There wasn’t really a choice to me. While Tatiana was beautiful and definitely interested, she was already promised to another, and I wasn’t about to get in the middle of a prior arrangement, even just for one night of pleasure. But Mab.” The sigh he released showed so much longing in it that it made my own heart ache for Kat.

“She was everything to me the moment we met. She’s the reason I didn’t want to become the Reaper when my father’s time was done. I spent several glorious years with her, in which, we conceived our child.” His dark blue eyes turned to where the prince lay. “When the time came for me to leave and take my father’s place, I didn’t want to go. I wanted to stay and raise our child and be with the woman I had fallen for even through our strange meeting.”

“I was prepared to tell my father no, that I would live my own life, and he would just have to find someone else. As you can imagine, he did not take my decision happily. With Moradoc in our realm, he needed me more than ever. If Moradoc wasn’t such a threat then maybe I could spend more time with my family but that wasn’t the case.” His eyes narrowed, his lips becoming a tight line on his face. “Not to be put down by my father’s words, I came up with a plan. I snuck into his storeroom where I knew there was something that would help me change my fate. You’ve heard of the tree of life, correct?”

I nodded. Kat had told me of the tree that had called her back to the Underground, but I’d not seen it for myself. The tree that had also helped her die and come back to herself. The same tree that was now nonexistent.

“Well, the original tree had long since perished and left behind a few seeds in case there was a great time of need.” He shrugged. “I was young and naive and thought my need was great enough that it justified using those seeds.”

“I stole my father’s seeds and snuck into the UnSeelie Realm where I was to meet up with Mab. She showed me a grove in the Orchard that we could plant them so that nobody would find out what we had done.” He laughed bitterly running a hand over his face. “I was such a fool then, thinking my actions wouldn’t have consequences. That I was helping not just myself, but everyone in the Underground.”

“Mab, bless her, has an affinity for plant life, much like your princess. She was able to cultivate the seed, forcing it to grow to full height without having to wait the millennia it would have taken.”

I cut him off, my mind catching up to where the story would surely end. “You used the fruit, didn’t you?”

The guilty expression that passed over his face was all the answer I needed. From what I had heard nothing good ever came from wishing on the fruit from that tree. It never gave you exactly what you wished for, it’s interpretation much different than what you intended to happen.

“I wished that Moradoc and his followers would disappear. That I might finally be free to live my life as I chose. The tree granted my wish.” He crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes downcast. “I came home to my father to see if it had worked only to find out Moradoc had vanished into thin air. My father was beside himself and had no idea what happened. That is when I pleaded for him to give me more time with Mab, and with no other reason to make me stay he granted it.”

“But it wouldn’t last. Not long after I had returned to Mab’s side did a messenger come to me of my father’s demise. My wish did indeed get rid of Moradoc, but it had made him and his followers something intangible, allowing Moradoc to somehow figure out how to harness the power of the Shadow Realm. He took the darkness meant to keep the dead from straying into himself and with it his followers. They became what you now know as the shadows.”

“Not, living or dead, they can feed on the Shadow Realms energy as if they were feeding on human dreams. Sending them back here was one of the worst things your princess could have done. Thus, why I had to put my son to sleep. With him in solid form, the shadows are easier to contain and keep from devouring all of the Shadow Realm and its power. But I can’t hold him forever. Eventually, he will overpower my spell and then seek vengeance once more.”

“That is why I ask you to save him.” The Reaper said finishing his story. “You are my only hope to get my son back and to right the wrong I had so selfishly created from making that wish.”

His story made my mind whirl. There was so much information that I had never believed could be true. Everyone, including myself, believed the Shadows were created because of the Seelie Queen sending them to the Shadow Realm, but it hadn’t been that at all.

While Tatiana had indeed done some deplorable things, she was only trying to clean up the mess that was made by someone else. Meaning she wasn’t as cold and heartless as everyone thought her to be. That Kat thought

her to be. Kat had based her entire relationship with her mother on this one thing alone, and she needed to be set straight but first, there was more to do.

“Say I do decide to help you, how would I even get into his mind? And how would I get out again?”

“Leave that up to me. I will help you get inside my son’s mind, but once you are in I’m afraid,” he paused and shook his head, “I won’t be able to help you get out again. If you clear Dorian of the Shadows then he will wake up and you will come out on your own but if you don’t...”

“I’ll be stuck there,” I finished for him. I’d heard stories similar to this and it was easy to guess the outcome. I stared down at the prince’s form, my face scrunched in concentration. What was I going to do?



Chapter 13

Kat

GOING INTO THE Shadow Realm would mean I would be alone. Which normally wasn't a problem. In the past, I had never had an issue being alone. I actually thrived on it.

Even in college, I hadn't been one to go out and party. I preferred to sit in my room and read. It wasn't because people didn't try to be my friend. More like I had a low tolerance for bullshit, and the longer I was friends with someone, the more drama came with it. So I had come to the conclusion that being alone was better. At least, at the time.

Now, I hardly got a moment to myself. There was always one crisis after another. One Fae or another that needed my help. And with Alice living with me, she was always bringing Hatter or some other poor Fae home. It made it hard to keep to myself.

I suppose I could have hidden in my bedroom until they had all gone, but then I'd be in there all the time and god damn it, it was my house. Well, technically my grandmother's house but by relation that meant it was mine.

So, if I was so good with being alone why was the idea of going to the shadow realm by myself so worrying? Was it because it was unknown territory? I could go to the Seelie court alone because I had been there before with others. But the Shadow Realm? That was a whole other ball game.

I could ask Mop or even Trip to come with me. I knew they would drop everything to help me. But I also knew this was my mistake that needed to be fixed. I couldn't drag them into it.

Alice would probably offer to come with me if I told her where I was going, but I knew I couldn't let her. She had Hatter and the other Fae that needed her help. Besides, someone had to stay behind in case something went wrong. I could end up stuck there forever and then where would the Fae be? No, Alice needed to be there so the government didn't try to force the Fae into camps or the stupid registration law they were trying to pass.

Being on my own wasn't all that bad. It meant I got to make all the decisions. Which was also a negative in a way, because now I didn't have

anyone else to lean on. It was all up to me.

Yippee.

I could have delayed going. It wasn't like he was going anywhere, but I wanted Chess back, and if there was a chance that Dorian could be saved I had to try. I had no idea what awaited me on the other side or if I would just be dropping into a black pit of nothing. The Shadow Realm was supposedly where the Reaper lived. Which meant that it was kind of like the other side. Or it could be heaven. Or hell. With my track record it was more likely to be the latter.

Not letting myself stall any longer, I took a deep breath and got ready to step through the mirror only to be stopped by an annoying buzzing in my pocket. Confused for a moment at the feeling, I realized it was my phone and pulled the somehow miraculously not dead device into my hand.

It was Alice. Wonderful. I hadn't let her or anyone else know what had happened with Chess and the mirror or that I was going to the Shadow Realm. I could just imagine how much she was probably freaking out since I never came home this morning.

Taking a deep breath, I pressed the button to accept the call, "Hi, Alice, how's it going? Did you and Hatter have fun last night?" I decided to start with talking about her in hopes that she wouldn't ask where I was. If I got her uncomfortable enough maybe she would hang up and leave me alone for the rest of the day. I had worlds to adventure to and people to save god damn it.

"Don't give me that," she snarled over the phone, clearly on to my ploy. "Where the hell are you?" Yelling and things smashing could be heard in the background where she was.

"I'm exactly where you left me, at Chess' of course." The beauty of cell phones was she couldn't tell if I was lying or not unless I somehow lost my ability to cover the lie in my voice. Which, to be honest, wasn't likely.

"No, you are not, you big fat fibber," she snapped, her voice becoming haughty.

I crossed my arms over my chest and ignored the curious look Mab was giving me. "I am not. I'm standing right in Chess' living room right now. The purple and pink explosion is making me want to have an aneurysm just so I don't have to look at it anymore."

"No, you aren't. You know how I know that?" she paused waiting for me to deny it once more, but I held my tongue. "Because I was just there

and you were nowhere to be found.”

“Then we must of just missed each other,” I chimed in, still holding on to the hope of keeping her out of this.

There was silence from her for a moment, though there was still a ruckus going on in the background that I was sure I needed to ask about at some point once I got out of my own sticky situation. After a moment or so, she let out an aggravated sigh, “Fine play it your way. If you are there then you can easily get home now. We have a situation.”

Frowning, my brows crinkled together. “What do you mean a situation?”

“Hey! Stop that, leave those alone!” Alice shouted out of nowhere, confusing the hell out of me. “Sorry, that wasn’t meant for you.”

“It sounds like there is some kind of party going on over there. Did things go better than you planned last night with Hatter? Or am I missing something?”

She let out a short laugh. “Ha! My romantic night was cut short when we had some unexpected visitors.”

“Oh really? I’m sorry to hear that, I know how much you were looking forward to getting it on with your lovey,” I teased her, though my apology was sincere. Getting private time lately was hard to come by, so when we had a chance to get it, we grabbed it by the balls and didn’t let it go for anyone or anything.

“Well,” she huffed, “that’s over and done with. The important thing is for you to get home. The president announced their plans for that Fae registration on the news today and everyone has lost their marbles,” she paused and yelled at someone in the background once more before coming back on the line. “I woke up to trolls on the lawn and Faeries in the kitchen. You won’t believe the mess those little critters can make.”

Oh, I believed it. Faeries were one irritating creature. I wished they had some kind of magical bug spray to get rid of them. If left unchecked they would destroy my grandmother’s house before I could even get there to help out. Not that I was going to, but Alice didn’t know that, yet.

“I don’t see what the problem is,” I shrugged, though she couldn’t see it, “You are better at calming the masses down than I am. I always stick my foot in my mouth and make it worse.”

“But they need to see you to feel more secure. Even just being here will help the situation immensely. There are already news crews lining up

outside your house, waiting to get a statement from the famed Seelie Princess.”

I swallowed hard. News reporters? Yikes. Not even on my best day did I want to be subjected to the horror that was the daily news. If I was bad at talking to people, I knew there was no way I wouldn’t be able to make the situation worse by talking to those vultures. Every word I had ever said to them had been twisted into some crazy fairy tale with a gruesome ending.

Taking a deep breath, I let it out and ripped the proverbial band aide off. “I’m sorry to tell you this, Alice, but you are on your own.”

“What? You’re not coming? I need you for this. I’m not the princess, or the moderator, I’m not anything. I can’t handle a problem this big.” She kept rambling on and then when she finally took a breath I jumped in.

“I’m not at Chess’.”

“I knew it!” she screeched, causing me to wince and pull the phone from my ear. “You big fat liar face. I knew you weren’t at Chess’. Just missed you my fanny.”

“Yes, yes. You were right,” I grumbled.

“If you aren’t at Chess’ where are you and how long will it take you to get here?”

“About that...” I started and scratched the back of my head as I gave a nervous laugh. “I’m in the UnSeelie Palace about two seconds away from going to the Shadow Realm.”

There was a long pause that had me looking at the phone to make sure I hadn’t lost the call or my phone hadn’t finally died. Nope she was still there. I hoped she hadn’t died of shock, or worse, the Faeries had gotten to her.

Just thinking of all the horrible scenarios that could have gone down had me calling into the phone, “Alice? Are you there? Blink once for yes and two for no. Wait, no. Don’t do that cause I can’t see you. Just say something damn it!”

“I’m here.” Was her low reply. Those two words held so much contained rage that I was half tempted to pretend I lost the call on my side.

“Oh, good,” I gave a nervous laugh once more, “I thought I’d lost you for a second. But anyways like I said, I’m about to head out and can’t help you.”

“Katherine Nottingham, don’t you dare hang up on me!” the tone of her voice had my finger pausing on the end button and then the stupid person in

me actually listened and didn't hang up.

"What?"

"What do you mean what?" she shrilled, "You were just going to go to some dangerous realm without mentioning it to anyone? What if you die? What if you got stuck there forever and then who would take your place? The Fae community is already rocky at best, and if the one person they look up to gets herself killed, then who would be here to fight for them?"

"One, chill the fuck out," I started, an irritated tick starting at my eyebrow at her words. "Two, I didn't not tell anyone, the queen knows I'm here, it's her portal, duh."

"Well, that's just lovely."

"Hey, can the sarcasm, I'm not done yet," I interrupted her before she could go into an even longer tangent. "I'm not leaving the Fae completely defenseless. That's what you are for," She tried to interrupt me but I kept talking, "now before you try to tell me you aren't the one for the job, you are wrong. Who has gone out of their way to find all the Fae in our area? Who's the one who made sure that they had places to live? Or work? It wasn't me."

"But that's beside the point, you had just lost the love of your life, you had a reason to be neglectful."

"Bullshit. I was too wrapped up in my own problems to care about anything else going on around me. Hell, if you didn't live with me I wouldn't have any idea what was going on with the Fae in the human world to begin with. If they trust anyone to help them through this time, it's you."

"If you say so," she replied with uncertainty.

"I know so," I assured her and then turned to Mab who wasn't even pretending not to listen to our conversation. "In fact, I'm going to send the queen to help you out. It would do the humans some good to see an authority figure besides me working for the Faes benefit."

My words caused Mab to raise a brow at me, but she didn't comment otherwise. Smart woman.

"All right, if you say so, but this place needs cleaned up if we are having royalty visit. Your laundry has been strewn everywhere."

I groaned, those little Faerie bastards better not have messed up my room. I wasn't a particularly organized person but the system I had worked for me. If they screwed it up I wouldn't find anything for weeks.

After I said my goodbyes and hung up the phone, I turned to Mab. “Well, you heard what is going on. You wanted to be there for your people. Now you will get your chance. The humans are going through with the plan to force us to register.”

At my words, Mab’s face hardened. Her eyes filled with a determination and even I wouldn’t want to stand in her way.

“We shall see about that,” was all she said before she swept out of the room, her dress fluttering behind her, leaving me utterly alone with the mirror.

With Mab well on her way, I shook off my nerves and took another deep breath before letting it out. Placing one foot in front of the other, my eyes straight ahead, I stepped through the mirror.



Chapter 14

Chess

I WISH I could say that when I saw Dorian's sleeping form that I was ecstatic that he had survived, but I'm not that good of a person. The only thing I felt was annoyance and anger.

This man, this petty, spiteful man had done everything in his power to destroy what Kat and I had. Even before he had joined the Shadows he hadn't acted for one minute like the dutiful ruler he had once been.

Before the whole thing with Kat, I didn't see the prince often. He was too busy messing with the lower Fae to bother with the moderator. The majority of the time he avoided me.

It had been just after the Seelie Queen had shoved the twins onto me. Not long before Kat showed up in the Underground. I didn't know if it was a sign of things changing or not, but thinking back to it now, I wanted to think it was the Undergrounds way of warning us. Not that we listened.

I'd been hanging out at the base of my willow as usual, completely bored out of my mind when I heard an owl hoot. Anyone who had a lick of sense in the UnSeelie Court knew that an owl only meant one thing. The dark prince.

Cursed as he was at the time, it wasn't smart to mess with him. He was unstable and unpredictable. One never knew what kind of mood he would be in. Just the week before he had killed two changelings because they had annoyed him. There was no telling what would set him off.

Now that I knew the Seelie Queen had cursed him, I think it was her way of punishing not just the prince, but also all of the UnSeelie for daring to take her daughter from her, not that the rest of us had anything to do with it. Though, the rest had welcomed Alice with open arms and by association, I supposed that made us all guilty in her eyes.

The owl hoot was followed by a flutter of wings and then the vines that hung around the willow parted to reveal the prince in all his broodiness. His bright blue eyes darted around the area, a scowl on his lips before they landed on me. They curled up into a playful sort of cruel grin that said he wasn't here for anything I would enjoy.

Standing to my feet, I tapped my riding crop against my thigh, the stinging pain of it keeping my own temper in check as I greeted him, “Your highness, what do I have the honor?”

“Half-breed, I’d always wondered why you are here. What makes you so special to give you the role of moderator?” he cocked his head to the side as if in thought. I didn’t answer him knowing anything I said would just set him off. It was a fine line we walked with the dark prince. One I didn’t plan to fall off any time soon.

“Are you just the queen’s lackey or her lover as well? Are you so good at what you do that she would reward you with a pretend position?” the mocking in his voice caused me to clack the crop harder against my thigh.

“My position is hardly pretend.” I couldn’t help but answer, regretting it instantly when his eyes sharpened on me.

“Really? Is that what she tells you? Because the way I see it is you are nothing more than a flunky with a pretty face. Made for their entertainment and nothing more. Not someone like me, with real power.” The prince’s face contorted into a pained expression, the symbols on his face lighting up and then going out.

I wished I’d known that day what that light meant. That it meant he was fighting against his curse. Then I wouldn’t have done what I had done next, but alas, it wasn’t so.

Before the prince could spout another insult, I had twisted in place and appeared behind him. Shoving him with a booted foot, I knocked him to the ground.

“Who is bowing to who now, your highness?” I mocked, laughing at his prone form.

The prince growled and my laughter was cut off mid laugh as an invisible hand wrapped around my throat. I struggled against his hold on me unable to breathe. My hands scratched at an unseen force.

“Do not forget your place, half-breed. You may have been given position of moderator but you do not dictate me,” he hissed in my face before the force holding me up disappeared, dropping me to the ground. Heaving in deep breaths, I glared up at the prince who lorded his power over me.

The memory caused me to have quite a conundrum on my hand. On the one side, I could let Dorian die and with him the Shadows. It would ensure that the Shadows were truly gone and that they wouldn’t come back.

It was a logical choice. It should have been the easy choice. Dorian would die and the Shadows would be gone and any drama and chance of him coming between Kat and me would be eliminated.

On the other hand, I could go into his mind and risk everything to save him. Or, I could get rid of the Shadows and Dorian would be safe, but I also ran the risk of getting stuck in his mind myself.

I felt like I had a little devil on my shoulder whispering to me. "But no one would know if I let him die. Not Kat, not anyone back home."

It was tempting to just listen to that voice. He had caused me nothing but pain and heartache as well as put Kat in a horrible position. Sadly though, if I let him die, I highly doubted that the Reaper would help me get back home. In fact, I was positive he wouldn't.

There was also the fact that if Kat did find out, she would be devastated. Though, she might say she didn't care about Dorian anymore, there was still a piece of her that still loved him and would always love him. It hurt for me to admit it but it was true. Which was all the more reason that I should let him rot.

Turning to face the Reaper, I sighed. "What do I need to do?" Even as I asked the question I regretted my decision. I had a sneaky feeling that this would somehow come back to bite me in the ass.

The Reaper didn't seem to notice the lack of enthusiasm in my voice. Which was good considering if he thought for one second I was going to let his son die, he might make sure I never saw Kat again. Even worse, he could stick me in some kind of hellhole made for the really bad Fae. I was sure there had to be some kind of place for them.

"I don't decide that actually," The Reapers voice cut through my thoughts. My eyes jerked up to his face where he had an amused look in his eyes. Had he been able to hear me this whole time? I had forgotten he was able to do that. Damn.

Chuckling at my distress, the Reaper shook his head. "No, I don't listen in all the time. You were just projecting your thoughts so loudly it was easy to pick up on what you were thinking. Don't worry everyone thinks that the first time they meet me."

Frowning in confusion, I stared up at him. "So, you don't decide who goes where?"

"I only bring the souls here. Once here they move on on their own. To heaven? To hell? Who knows?" He shrugged. "I'm not dead."

“You're not?” I looked him up and down trying to discern exactly what he was. I had thought he was something more than Fae but his previous story made it out that he was just like the rest of us.

“No. I'm not.” His gaze settled firmly on my face. “The thing you must understand is that I am the same as any other Fae. I just happen to have the ability to cater to the dead.”

“Then what about those glowing things you said were spirits. How come they are still here?” I waved a hand toward the outside where I had first seen them.

“Those are the ones who will not be put to rest. They refuse to go beyond to the final resting place. Thus, they linger here trying to take anyone they can with them into their misery.”

“So then what happens when you die? Does someone take your place?”

“Of course I will. I'm not immortal,” he scoffed and moved over to where Dorian's body lay. “And as for who will take my place that highly depends on if you will save my son. Like my father and I, he will be trained to cater to the souls of the deceased until he has a child that will take his place. Allowing him to retire and do whatever he likes with his life.”

From the Reaper's previous story I had a feeling I knew what he wanted to do with the remainder of his life. The UnSeelie Queen had never married nor had she ever shown the slightest interest in having a king. It wouldn't be surprising to know she had been waiting for him all this time.

Clapping my hands together, I rubbed them for good measure before moving next to the Reaper. I cast my eyes on the prince and asked, “So, what do I have to do? How do I get inside of his mind?”

“It's quite simple really. Place your hand here.” He grasped my hand nearest to him and led it over to hover above the prince's chest. He tried to lower it down so that I was touching him but I resisted.

“You have nothing to be afraid of, he won't wake up just from you touching him,” he chuckled at my reluctance, “This isn't even the hard part.”

“It isn't?” His words weren't reassuring at all. I was regretting agreeing to this more and more and it hadn't even begun.

“No, the hard part will be getting you out. This part will only take you letting me into your mind as long as you don't shut me out, then you will

easily be able to slip into my son's head. Once there it will be up to you to figure out how to dispel the shadows."

Frowning hard at him, I hopefully replied, "Any ideas of how to do that?"

The Reaper thought about it for a moment, his grip on my hand lessening, but he didn't remove it from where he held it above the prince's body. "There will more than likely be a series of tests. Things that the prince has to overcome to weaken the shadows. Once they are to the point where they can't latch onto his mind anymore they should be easy to kick out of his mind."

Should be? I didn't like the sound of that. Everything he was saying sounded like theory. Like he didn't know for sure if it would work and was just making it up as he went along and hoping it would work. Which was bad for me, since I was the one who was putting my tail on the line for a man I didn't even like.

"Very well, let's get this over with so I can go home," I growled, my tail whipping behind me, making me unable to hide my nervousness completely.

"Certainly, now place your hand here." He lowered my hand down, and this time I didn't resist. When my palm touched the middle of the prince's chest I held my breath expecting some kind of reaction from his body or to get some sort of shock, but nothing happened. I guess the Reaper was right on that account. He was truly gone from this world.

"Now," the Reaper continued, "close your eyes. It will help you to visualize what I am saying." Pursing my lips in displeasure, I did what he asked. My anxiety shot through the roof each moment I couldn't see.

"Good. Now, I want you to picture a door. It doesn't matter what it looks like, it's the functionality that matters," he answered my unasked question before I could even formulate it in my mind.

A solid rectangular door with dark oak finish formulated in my mind. Why this particular door? I wasn't sure. It just seemed right as it came into my mind's eye.

"I want you to reach for the door handle." His words echoed not in my ears but in my mind as my hand reached for the brass handle. In my mind, the handle was cool to the touch as if it hadn't been used in a while. If I were to get scholarly on it, I would say that it was a representation of the

prince's comatose state. His mind and body were unused and thus lacking in heat.

"This part is very important. So listen closely." I focused on his words as much as I could, not wanting to do anything that might cause me to get stuck in the prince's mind, or worse, my own.

"As you open the door, you must not close yourself off. You have to imagine you are light as air so that you may float from your consciousness to his. Understood?"

"Yes." I nodded but realized that it was inside of my head and I hadn't really physically done it. This was going to be really strange, I could already tell.

"Good. Then open the door."

My wrist twisted as I unlatched the lock and did as he said. Light, airy, I am floating through space. Nothing can weigh me down.

I thought I was doing a great job until I tried to step through the door. Then it was like an anchor fell on my chest. I couldn't breathe and all thoughts of feather-likeness shot from my mind.

"He's fighting you," the Reaper's voice rang in my mind, "He doesn't realize you are trying to help him. You have to reassure him so he will let you in."

Reassure him? The guy who hated my guts as much as I did his? That was easier said than done.

Prince? I said in my mind feeling quite silly. *It's Cheshire. I am here to help. You have to let me in or you will die.*

Nothing happened for a moment. There was no answer, no evidence that he had even heard me. Then the entrance to the door was no longer weighing me down, I was light and weightless once more. As I stepped through a sick feeling overcame me just before the door slammed shut behind me. What the hell had I gotten myself into?



Chapter 15

Kat

THE LIQUID THAT enveloped me was unlike the others. This one wasn't cold. It was glacial. It burned like fire where it touched, and it felt like it lasted forever.

Finally, I fell out of the mirror on the other side. I collapsed to the ground and took in deep heaving breaths. It took me a few moments before I realized the pain was gone. I sat up and glanced at myself, turning my hands over in confusion. There were no burns, no markings where there should have been.

Mab had said the Shadow Realm was not for the living, but the dead. Those who were sent here still alive wouldn't be welcomed at any point. Perhaps this was what she meant when she warned me before I stepped through the glass. Maybe that was its way of trying to get me to turn back?

I had expected a lot of things when I came through the mirror, but what I didn't expect was it to be so blah. Darkness stretched as far as I could see and the fog was thick enough to make soup out of it. And what was up with the fucking mirrors? They were everywhere. Did someone rob a mirror store? Or were they just really bad at decorating?

I moved around the area, the dirt ground beneath my feet making the area even more depressing. If this was the afterlife I wasn't looking forward to it. If the dreary atmosphere wasn't enough, the utter lack of anyone else would have sealed the deal.

I was all for alone time but this was ridiculous.

I started toward the mirror area, my eyes flickering from one mirror to the next. Each surface reflected my face. If they were used for communication like Chess had done with me in his bathroom, they weren't active now.

Kneeling on the ground next to one of the mirrors, my hand reached out to touch the frame to see if I could activate it with my magic. The instant my hand touched the metal frame, the mirror's surface changed and showed the wall on the opposite side of the mirror in my hallway at home.

I moved from the mirror to another one. Not hesitating this time, I touched the frame. This one reflected the mirror in my bathroom. The next one showed my bedroom.

I collapsed to the ground with a huff, my heart beating in my chest like a thundering drum. Had Chess been watching me this whole time? Trying to communicate but unable to get through?

My eyes burned as my throat clogged up. All this time I had been thinking he was gone, that I had to move on, and he had been right here the entire time.

“So, you must be the long lost Seelie Princess.” Glancing up from where I had fallen to pieces, my eyes widened at the woman before me.

She was clad in a crimson gown, the neckline plunging so low I could see her navel. If I had worn it I'd have tripped and fallen out of it with the first step, but the way she moved in it was like it was part of her. Where she moved it moved, slithering along the dirt ground like a snake.

“Who are you?” my voice came out scratchy and I hated it. I had a feeling that any weakness in front of her would be a very bad idea.

“Are all humans so rude? Cheshire wasn't half as rude as you. He at least introduced himself before he started demanding answers.”

At the mention of Chess, I jumped to my feet, launching myself onto her, my hands clutching her shoulders. “You know where Chess is? Was he here? Where is he now?”

“So many questions and yet you still haven't answered mine.” She clucked her tongue and brushed my hands away.

Dropping my hands back to my sides, I straightened my shoulders to look her squarely in her dark eyes. “Yes, I am the long lost Seelie Princess. Now, will you please tell me where Chess is?”

“I figured that much out already, what I don't know is your name. What do they call you? It can't just be princess.”

“Depends on who you ask.” My eyes narrowed in suspicion as I evaded her question. Why did she want to know my name? Nothing good had ever come from a Fae wanting to know my name. That usually meant they were trying to get something from me.

“Well, what does Cheshire call you?”

Not liking the attitude coming from this woman, I gave her a nasty smile. “You can call me Lady, or better yet, moderator. Since that is what I am.”

The flicker of fear in her eyes made my heart pitter-patter. She tried to cover it up with a snooty scowl. “They let someone like you be the moderator? They sure have lowered their standards since I lived in the Underground.”

I couldn’t help myself; I did the mean girl thing. “Well, I’d say they’ve raised their standards if you are here. With all that going on,” I gestured to her mostly exposed torso and chest, “I’m surprised you weren’t cast out sooner. What were you exiled for? The inability to keep your legs closed longer than your mouth?”

Okay, so what happened next I totally deserved. I let myself get drawn in by her petty insults and only had myself to blame. So, when I found myself going from a standing position to being knocked on my ass, it wasn’t entirely surprising.

As I tried to relearn to breathe, my magic came to the surface, red alert to anything that might attack me once more. Morgana stood where she had been before but her arms turned into snakes.

Dark red and black stripped; they stretched out across the area. When she realized she had missed she slowly recoiled the slithering cretins back into her, her gaze searching for where I had jumped.

Morgana? More like freaking Medusa! Just when I thought I’d seen everything, something else happened and I had to reset my whole look on things that were abnormal.

I tensed as I watched her prepare for another attack. Her arms went rigid and her eyes narrowed as she locked on to me. Just as she was about to shoot the snakes my way again, I tucked and rolled like my life depended on it. Who said school didn’t teach you anything? Though, I doubted the firefighters meant for it to be used to avoid attacks by crazy snake ladies, but if it worked it worked!

“Stay still, you little twit!” she growled out in aggravation. She jerked around to find me again, the snakes that were her arms hissed at me, liquid dripped from their fangs. When it hit the floor it sizzled and caused tiny holes to form.

Note to self. Avoid fangs.

“Why would I do that?” I called back as I dodged yet another attack, barely avoiding getting bit in the ass. “You are trying to kill me. I don’t think Cheshire would be too happy if you killed his savior.” It was risky trying to use Chess as my winning piece, but from what I could tell she had

a lady boner for him the size of Texas. Maybe she wouldn't want to risk making him mad?

"Pfft." She made one snake hand turn back into a regular one and flipped her hair over her shoulder. "As far as he's concerned I'm doing him a favor. Who wants to go back to the Underground with someone like you waiting for him on the other side? He would be much better off with me."

Well, it was worth a try.

"Oh, yeah?" I shot back, "Why don't you put your magic where your mouth is?" I had only just gotten the question out when her arm changed back into a snake, and this time instead of coming for me, they burrowed into the ground.

If there was one movie I hated more than anything it was Tremors. The first time I had ever watched it I was nine and I had nightmares for months. I refused to stand on solid ground and would walk on all the furniture to get anywhere. It pissed my mother off to no end, and Hillary was always yelling at me to get off the furniture. This time was no different.

Seeing those things go into the ground, I high tailed it away from where she was and scrambled onto a rock that had a mirror leaning against it. While it did have me on high ground, it didn't keep me from being pretty much trapped. All I could do was keep my eyes peeled and listen for their attack. My blood pumped in my ears as I jerked my head from side to side looking for those little fuckers.

"If only dear Cheshire could see his princess now," Morgana laughed, "Trapped like a mouse with nowhere to go."

Her laughter only caused my fear to turn to anger, and the moment I stopped looking for the snakes to reply to her was when she struck. The earth crumbled as the snake shot out of the ground and into the air. Before I could make a move to get out of the way, they whipped around, wrapping their long bodies around my frame.

Damn it. How had I fallen for her trick? I was the one who was usually distracting my enemies with my snarky remarks and here I was falling for the same ploy.

The snakes bodies constricted around me making it hard to breathe. Their heads danced around my head as if they were laughing at my pain. Trying not to panic, I took in shallow breaths. I saw it once on a TV show on snake attacks.

The more the victim panicked, the deeper they breathed and each breath they took, the snake could constrict tighter. I figured that if I wasn't giving them much room to deal with it might bide me some time. Hopefully.

The pressure on my arms and the rest of my body almost reminded me of going through the hole to get to the Between. Like it was trying to fit me in a size 2 tube top. I wasn't no petite biddy, so the imagery wasn't a pretty sight.

Trying not to think about the situation I was in, I let my magic curl up inside me. It balled up into a bundle of crackling energy, pulsating and churning, just waiting for me to release it. I waited and waited. It had to be the right moment. When she thought she was winning, that was when I would strike.

Finally, she started to get bored of how long it was taking to kill me and cocked her head to the side. "Why won't you die already? You're already in the Shadow Realm, it's not like you would have far to go."

Before she got the last few words out I let that tight ball of energy go. It rushed out of me and barreled into the bodies of the snakes. They screeched with Morgana, making my ears ring.

I didn't have time to worry about it, though. I jumped from the rock and darted across the area to hide behind a large full-length mirror. Taking in deep helpings of air, I listened to see if she would attack once more.

"I'm trying to help you, Miss Moderator," she taunted after she had finished screaming, "you'll be so much happier without all the stress of being Fae royalty, besides didn't you already kill yourself once? Cheshire would be better off with someone more secure in themselves."

While she was busy spouting off how wrong I was for him, I moved around a set of mirrors until I was on her blind side. Then with a battle cry, much like my hero, Xena, Warrior Princess, I slammed into her knocking her down to the ground.

Straddling her hips, I gripped each of her wrists in my hands as hard as I could. The pressure caused the snakes to disperse and only her hands to lie in their place. She bucked and wailed as she tried to get me off of her, but I held tight. I shoved my magic into the earth around her, forcing the deadened ground to sprout forth vines that wrapped themselves around her body and limbs.

With her thoroughly subdued, I should have gotten up. I should have left her there and went to find Chess but the power was pumping through me. The need to use more magic came to the surface at an unstoppable pace.

The magic curled into the vines pulling them tighter and tighter. Whatever else she might have said was cut off by the chokehold it had on her throat. Her face started to turn blue; her eyes bulged in their sockets. A voice in my head screamed at me to stop but it was faint. Since I had come here alone there was no one here to pull me back. No one here to make me stop. It was just my power and me.

I was just about to turn her into a squashed potato when a single tear slipped out of my eye. Confused, I reached a hand up to touch it. The action was enough to cause my magic to stall.

Looking down at the glittering moisture on my finger a stark realization filled me. Horror covered my face and I jumped up from where I sat on top of her. Now that I wasn't trying to obliterate her she was taking in deep breaths, her eyes full of terror but not brave enough to move in case I struck out again.

I skittered away from her, the temptation to finish what I started too prevalent in my mind. Stumbling to my feet, I ran from her and into the thick fog that made my stomach recoil. So engulfed by my own emotions I was easily able to push the feelings aside and keep running. To where? I didn't have a fucking clue.



Chapter 16

Chess

I IMAGINED THE inside of a person's head looking like a hall with a long line of doors. Each one leads into a different part of the person's mind. A childhood would be behind one door, good memories behind another, and all the big bad memories, the ones you wished you could forget, would be locked up tight behind the biggest door of all.

When I walked through the proverbial door that led into the prince's head, I hadn't expected to walk straight into what had to be one of his worst nightmares.

There, standing in the Orchard, was the prince along with Alice. Her face flickered between a tall blonde woman that I could only assume was the princess and what Alice looked like now. Next to them stood the real Princess, Lynne.

The scene looked normal except the princess was wielding a blade in her hand. She had it pointed at the two of them while tears ran down her face. Since this was Lynne and not Kat, plus a dream, I didn't have the overwhelming urge to be near her or to soothe her pain.

"How could you do this to me?" she screamed, waving the dagger at them. "I thought you loved me."

"I do love you, Lynne," the prince argued, reaching for her, but she jerked away from him, the blade just barely missing the palm of his hand.

"If you loved me you wouldn't have been with her. Just admit it, you never loved me at all, did you?" she shouted into his face, "It was just a game arranged by my mother. I'm just a joke to you, in fact, I shouldn't be here at all."

She took the blade she had in her hand and flipped it around so it was pointed toward her heart. The prince cried out and tried to jerk the dagger out of her grasp. At the last moment, instead of trying to stab herself, she twisted it around and shoved it into his stomach with a gleeful grin.

"Lynne, why?" his words came out gurgled as blood dripped from his lips. The prince's hand clutched at the handle protruding from his body.

Blood poured from the wound. He fell to his knees as Alice and Lynne conformed into one person.

The prince's eyes widened as a mirror image of himself, sans the knife wound, stared down at him. Someone had a guilty conscious.

The wounded prince collapsed to the ground, a pool of liquid beginning to form around him. The evil version of him stood over his corpse for a moment, laughing at the scene. Then, like something had clicked, the scene started all over again with him kissing Alice and Lynne catching them.

Had this been what he'd been seeing ever since he'd gone to the Shadow Realm? While I was dallying with Morgana and trying to find a way home, he had been suffering alone. His guilt eating him alive.

While the prince was busy replaying his darkest regret, I took a moment to look around. The Orchard was exactly what it looked like in the real world, except with it being in the prince's mind, there seemed to be a dark edging around it. Like the mood of the dream was causing the lights to dim.

Wondering if everything else was like in the real world, I glanced down at myself to see that I was an actual physical person. The clothing I was wearing in the Shadow Realm was the same as what I wore now. Curious about what else could be the same, I reached over and pinched myself. A sharp pain went through my arm, and a red mark appeared where I had marred myself.

So, I could get hurt here. Could I die? Watching the prince stab himself over and over again didn't give me the confidence that I would leave unscathed should I come into contact with the same fate.

I turned my head back and forth wondering if I was stuck in the Orchard or if I could leave? Would I end up in the queen's garden or did it just end? The only way to find out was to move but first...

I took the first step since arriving, my foot crunched in the grass beneath my feet as I wandered over to where the prince was bleeding out. Just as the scene reset itself, and the princess started screeching again, I cleared my throat.

Strangely enough, not just the prince's head turned but all of them did as if they were one body. Seeing as it was the prince's mind, I could imagine they were all him in a way. His mind was filling in the roles of those that tormented him.

“Not that I’m not enjoying you kill yourself over and over again, but we do have a time limit here.” I pointed at my wrist, though I wasn’t wearing a watch. What I said wasn’t exactly true. The Reaper hadn’t said I only had such and such amount of time, but I figured the longer I was in here, the more likely I would get stuck. So getting out fast was the best course of action.

In unison, the three heads tilted to the side as they surveyed my form. They seemed confused by my very presence, which didn’t bode well for me. I didn’t need the prince’s brain thinking I was an intruder and have him try to boot me out before I even got started.

“It’s me, Cheshire.” I started taking a few cautious steps forward. “We both got sent to the Shadow Realm when Kat said the spell.”

“Spell?” the word came out of all three of their mouths, but I only heard one voice. The prince’s. Good, we were making progress.

“You remember, you decided to join the Shadows and became a certified boarding ship for their magic. Then Kat sent you here, unfortunately, as a side effect of that, I ended up in the Shadow Realm too.” I shrugged and sighed. “Nothing seems to go the way we plan it. Oh well.”

This time only the prince’s form had a reaction. His lips pursed together, and he stepped away from the two women. The moment he cleared them they dissipated. As he walked over to where I stood his expression was still that of confusion. It seemed we weren’t as far along as I thought.

“Cheshire?”

“Yep, that’s me. Cheshire S. Cat, at your service.” I gave a mock bow to him with a cheeky grin.

“What’s happened?” he looked around like it was the first time he had truly noticed his surroundings. “Why are we in the Orchard?”

I pointed a finger at him. “That’s all on you and your conscious. I had nothing to do with it; I’m just along for the ride.”

His eyes darted around as mine had moments ago. Panic filled his face, and I took a small step toward him. He shook his head side to side, his dark hair whipping around him. His hands shook. He gripped his face and started muttering to himself.

“Look, don’t have a meltdown now; we have to get out of here.” I placed my hands on his shoulders, forcing him to look at me. “I won’t be able to get out of your head until we get those Shadows out of here. And as

much as I enjoy watching you torture yourself, I'd rather not spend forever with only you as company. Got it?"

He visibly swallowed but nodded, the panic not completely gone from his eyes. "All right." His words came out raspy and tight. "What do we have to do?"

"Well, first," I clapped him on the shoulders before dropping my hands, "we need to figure out where in your mind the Shadows are holding up. Then, we can figure out how to get rid of them."

The prince didn't say anything as I tried to think of where they would go. Could they be back at my Willow Tree? Did it even exist here? Before I could try to think up any other options the prince spoke up.

"I think I know where they are."

"You do?" my eyes lit up with surprise, "well, don't hold back. Where are they?"

He let out a huff as if frustrated with my question. "I do not know exactly where they lie, but I have this feeling," he touched his stomach with his fingertips, "inside of my gut that is pulling at me. And I feel that if we follow it we will find them."

Frowning at his description, but not really having any other ideas, I gestured forward. "Very well, your highness, you lead the way."

"Dorian."

"What?" I cocked my head to the side, not understanding what he was saying to me.

"My name is Dorian. Not prince, not your highness. If you are going to be rummaging through my head you might as well know my real name."

I knew to most Fae giving their real name in this day and age was a big deal. The fact that he entrusted it to me said a lot, especially since he didn't really care for me. Since I didn't have another name but my own, half-breed advantage and all, I played it off as nothing.

"Let's not get all mushy now, get going, there are people waiting for us." I gave him a little shove with my tail as I crossed my arms over my chest.

Dorian started walking toward the entrance to the queen's garden. As I followed behind him, he started to ask questions.

"How long have I been in here?"

"I don't know," I shrugged. "We've been in the Shadow Realm for about six human months now, so I imagine you've probably been asleep

this whole time.”

“I’m asleep? I don’t remember even going to the Shadow Realm, let alone falling asleep.” He maneuvered around the green hedges and into the main part of the garden.

I had only come to the queen’s garden once in my life. It wasn’t really somewhere I cared to be, or somewhere I was welcome, but the time I had come I remembered vaguely wondering about the statue in the middle. Now that I had spoken to the Reaper I knew what that statue signified.

The tree was the seed he had stolen. The two women were the two queens of the Underground and lastly, the man was the Reaper himself. The statue depicted a story that was never told and one that really needed to be.

“I love my mother’s garden,” the prince, I mean, Dorian commented. His eyes wandered around the area. “I haven’t seen it in years. Not since I was exiled. Lynne, I mean, Kat,” he caught himself and paused before saying, “she told me to visit my mother since I was now free, but I never did. I was too worried about getting Kat back, thinking I’d have all the time in the world to reunite with my mother. But I didn’t know how wrong I was, I didn’t even have a chance, did I?”

He looked back at me and I choked. What the hell do you say to the guy who has been trying to steal your girl for the last year? Yeah, sure, she was his first, but she wasn’t the same person she was back then. I sure as hell wouldn’t have fallen for her if she had been. From what I heard, the princess was about as fun as the queen herself.

“I don’t know what kind of chance you had, to be honest,” I tried to give him a sympathetic smile, but it came out as more of a grimace, “I just know who she is now, not who she used to be.”

He made a humming noise before he held a finger up in thought. “That’s what my problem has been. She kept telling me she wasn’t Lynne, and I kept thinking she would change back into the woman I loved, but it was foolish of me to try to change her.”

“Well, look at it this way,” I walked past him toward the entrance to the palace, “you loved her enough to try and get her back. Many would have forgotten their love after so long. Holding on like you did shows loyalty, commitment. One day you’ll find someone else that will value those aspects.” I gave him a fanged tooth grin. “If not you can always flaunt your Fae crown at them and watch them come running.”

Dorian actually laughed at my words, making me feel weird inside. Who was this new prince I was seeing? Where was the broody, cruel, bastard I loved to hate? As I followed him into the palace, I wondered which one was the real him, the one I saw now, or the one he showed the world?

The moment we stepped into the palace I knew we were on the right track. My skin prickled with goose bumps, the sense of evil was thick in the air. Both of our gazes trained to the top of the stairs, where the Shadows had to be.

“Do you feel that?” Dorian asked me, as he moved toward the staircase. “I’ve never felt something so powerful. So malevolent.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, my feet slowly moving up behind him. My ears twitched on my head as I tried to keep alert to anything that might jump out at us. My tail wrapped around my leg showing my anxiety in the moment. I didn’t want to go up those stairs, but I knew I had to.

Each step made the air thicker and harder to breathe over the power being exuded. We were getting closer to them. That meant soon it would all be over. At least I hoped.

Dorian stopped in front of a door that I didn’t recognize. I’d never been to the palace and now was not really the time to be sightseeing. Instead of wondering what it was in the real world, I worried what was behind it here.

When Dorian twisted the handle and swung the door in, my worst fear was realized, and the reason we were here was before us.

The Shadows.



Chapter 17

Kat

I RAN UNTIL my legs gave out on me, and I collapsed in the middle of the fog. I heaved in air until I was on the verge of hyperventilating. Glancing around, I realized I couldn't see a fucking thing. The hand in front of my face was barely visible and it was touching my nose. If that wasn't bad enough, my emotions were running rampant, like a twister inside of me.

What the hell did I just do? Sure, Morgana had been trying to kill me, but I had never lost control to that point. The last time I almost killed someone had been with Tick, but Alice was there to stop me. I thought for sure this time I was going to kill her but then what was up with that tear?

It wasn't like me to get emotional like that. Was my own inner conscience telling me to stop or something else altogether? Either way, the panic inside me from almost committing murder slowly started to dissipate, and then with it, the effects of the fog started seeping in.

A sick feeling settled into the pit of my stomach, and I found it hard to breathe again. The overwhelming urge to just curl up into a ball had me frozen in place.

What the hell was this? I'd been so overwhelmed by my own emotions that I hadn't noticed anything else around me. As I ran into the fog I hadn't thought anything of it. Thoughts whirled through my mind that weren't my own. I didn't belong here. I shouldn't be here.

Paralyzed where I was, I grasped my head with my hands. I rocked back and forth in a soothing motion, but it didn't help. I didn't know long I had been here, or when it would end, but the thought of trying to move at all was terrifying.

Eventually, muffled voices filled the silence, but I could barely hear them over my own dread. I had closed my eyes tight, so I didn't know the figures were approaching me until they are right on me.

"Pathetic," squawked a voice, but I couldn't bring myself to care enough to look up.

"I'll bring her inside," another voice griped.

Something slid underneath me that was soft against the surface of my skin and then I was lifted into the air. Clutching onto whatever I could hold onto, I popped my eyes open to see a brightly colored floral dress beneath my hands.

I'd seen this dress before. My eyes lit up at the realization and then they shot to the face of the person carrying me, or persons I should say.

Type and Gripe, the two-headed sister bird that worked the reception desk in the Between, stared down at me. "Oh, you're awake. We thought we lost you there in the fog."

"Put her down, sister. She can walk," Gripe demanded letting go of my legs suddenly causing them to drop to the ground and me to stumble to my feet. It was then I noticed that the fear I'd been feeling had disappeared. Looking around I realized I was no longer standing in the fog but in a clear pathway that was only around them.

Waving my hands around in confusion, I asked them, "Why aren't you being affected by the fog? It's not even touching you."

"That's because we're supposed to be here, you aren't." Type gave me a know-it-all look as if I was supposed to know that.

"So, then, why are you guys here? Everyone thought you got taken by the Shadows."

"Ha, like they care about us. No, we got exiled by the queen."

"Like it was our fault that the Shadows killed two of her men and busted down the doors," Gripe crossed one arm over their chest and huffed, "like we were supposed to be able to stop it? It's hardly fair."

"I'm happy to see that you're okay," I half-heartedly said as I followed them through the fog, which precariously cleared around us with each step. "How do you know where you're going?"

"You're just outside of our home. We heard you screaming from over there." Type gestured with a wing.

"Your home?"

"Of course, where else do you think we live? Just because we're stuck here doesn't mean that we don't have some amenities," Type continued as we moved out of the fog and into an open area. It looked like the mirror graveyard and the hovel that were in Morgana's area.

Gripe snorted in response to her sister's words, "If you can call them amenities."

“Now, sister, you should be happy we have anything at all. We could be stuck in one of those stupid mirrors. Or worse yet, like the prince.”

At the mention of Dorian, my ears perked up. “The prince? Did he come through here? How was he? Was he still...”

“Taken over by the Shadows? Yeah,” Gripe squawked, waving her wing in the air, “He breezed through here causing a ruckus and was picked up by the Reaper. They headed back to his place...about...I don't know. How long has it been, sister?”

“Oh, how should I know? I don't even know how long we've been stuck here. I have no clue how long it's been since we saw him.” Type glanced at me over her glasses with a pointed look. “It's been awhile, dearie.” As if that answered anything at all.

“All right, then, how do I get to the Reaper's?”

At my words the sisters' laughed, putting their hands on their stomach, and throwing their heads back. They laughed quite a bit longer than I thought was necessary for the situation. When they finally stopped, Type said, “Missy, you don't go to the Reaper, he goes to you. Besides, none of us know how to get to where he lives anyways.”

“Except that horrible woman, Morgana,” Gripe jumped in, making me groan.

Great, the one person I needed help from was the person I had almost popped the eyeballs from her head. I wasn't going back there. So the only thing left for me to do was go forward, but since I couldn't get through the fog without the sisters' there with me, I didn't really have much of a choice but to get the sisters' to be my guide.

“Stop that, we know what you was thinking,” Gripe waved a feathered arm in the air, “Don't even look at us. Even if we knew where the Reaper was, we wouldn't take you there. No way, no how. Not on purpose.”

“What else am I supposed to do?”

Type gave her sister a look that caused a muttering argument between the two.

“No, I don't want to.”

“But she needs help.”

“He tried to eat us last time.”

“But she could talk to the queen to get us out.”

Gripe let out a frustrated growl, throwing her arm up in the air before turning her head away, while Type turned to me.

“There is one other person that could probably help you get to the Reaper’s.”

“Well, why didn't you say so?” I almost jumped for joy at the prospect of not having to ask Morgana for help. “I thought you said only Morgana knew how to get there.”

“Well, that wasn't entirely true. This other person doesn't really like to be disturbed.”

Gripe spoke up at that, “Ha! Doesn't like visitors my fanny. If you were a gorgeous High Fae he’d give you the time of day in a minute flat,” she snapped her fingers, “But that Cheshire is just as bad as his son. Trying to pollinate all of the flowers.”

“Cheshire? You mean Chess’ father? I met him through the mirror before I got here. Take me to him, he’ll help me, I know it.”

“That's where I draw the line. I'm not going anywhere near that mangy cat. No way, no how.” Gripe waved her wing in the air, an unrelenting look on her face.

“I can’t go into the fog on my own. I need you,” I pleaded with the sisters’.

Type looked at her sister and then back to me, her face torn between what to do. Finally, after what felt like forever, a light came on in her eyes.

“Ow!” Gripe yelled as Type pulled a feather from her neck. “What you do that for?”

“Here.” Type handed the feather to me and I hesitantly took it into my grasp.

“What's this for?” Unless I was looking to make a feather boa or have some naughty fun, I really didn't see the point of them giving me their feather.

“Try to walk into the fog. Go, go.” Type ushered me forward with a flip of her hand.

I cocked an eyebrow but then slowly made my way back to the edge of the fog. Before I could even place one foot inside of it everything inside of me screamed for me to turn back the other way. I had to mentally prep myself to even think about moving into it. Closing my eyes tight, I forced my foot to step into the fog. I waited for that sick feeling to come over me again, but it never came.

My eyes popped open, and I looked around myself, but the fog wasn't there. Just like before when I had been with the sisters’, the area around me

was clear of the mist, and I could move through it without getting paralyzed.

“Hey, it worked!” I turned back to them and raised my hands up in the air.

Type nodded her head. “Just as I thought. The magic doesn't require the whole person to be in the fog. You just need part of their essence. So hold on to that feather tight and you'll be able to find your way to the cat, who can then help you get to the Reaper's.”

Keeping a tight grip on the feather, I nodded my head at the sisters' in thanks and then turned on my heel, heading out into the foggy sea. I'm almost there Chess. Just hold on. I told myself as I trekked forward into the fog.

After a few minutes, I had no idea where I was going. I was completely lost. The sisters' had helped me find a way to get through the fog without it touching me, but they hadn't exactly told me how to get to Cheshire.

Growling in frustration, I gripped my hair and tried to think what to do. I could spend hours out here going in circles and never getting any closer. How could I get a direct line to him? I needed a beacon or guided trail.

That's when I remembered what Cheshire said to me in the mirror. Chess and my connection would help me find the way. Maybe this is what he meant? I just needed to concentrate on my magic and find where he was.

Releasing the breath I was holding, I closed my eyes, dug deep down to my magic and into the hole in my chest where Chess used to be. At first I thought it wasn't working and then suddenly I felt something. A familiar twinge that set my eyes shooting up and my feet moving forward.

I knew exactly where he was; I didn't need to go to his dad at all. I kept moving forward, my feet leading the way until the ground beneath my feet turned into stone and the fog around me dissipated. A large Coliseum like building that reminded me of those monuments they had in Greece, stood before me. It only made sense that it was the Reaper's home. Since he was pretty much the lord of the dead it was only fitting that he'd have a palace.

My feet made no sound as I made my way across the stone path surrounded by water. I tried to keep my eye on the prize, and by that, I meant Chess' hunky form, but a light caught my attention, drawing my gaze from the entrance to the Greek palace to the water along the path. Swirling

blue objects swam in the water. My lips ticked up as I realized they looked like some kind of magical sperm.

For magical jizz they sure were hypnotizing, I thought as I leaned down toward them. My hand reached out on its own, and as my fingers brushed the surface, the weird little swirls latched onto me. They pulled the feet out from under me jerking me from the path and into the freezing water.

Holding my breath, my eyes widened as the glowing things became more like leeches that were trying to drown me. They latched onto any skin they could find and began to pulsate around me. I could feel my magic being drained from me as more and more of them found their way to me.

I tried to claw at them, but my fingers just slipped through their bodies. My heart pounded in my chest as I began to really panic. Though, I couldn't touch them, the weight of their bodies made it close to impossible to move, let alone swim to the surface. I fought to move my arms and legs, but my energy was completely zapped, and I was running out of breath. I'd never been a great swimmer, preferring to lounge than to actually exercise. At this point, my lungs were burning from the extended length I had been underwater, and I thought for sure I was going to die.

Then, by some miracle, the little bugger suddenly ripped away from me. If they'd had mouths I was sure they would have been squealing in fright as they scurried away. My body became lighter, and I struggled to move toward the surface. My eyes were only half open, my will to live and oxygen low, so I couldn't make out the blurry figure that cast a shadow over where I floated in the water.

Hands reached down and grabbed me beneath my arms. They pulled me through the water and as I broke the surface, I let out a gasp. That gasp turned into a coughing fit as the water that had managed to find its way into my lungs decided it changed its mind and wanted out of this joint; I didn't blame it. I was beginning to wish I had never come.

Taking in the air like it was going out of fashion, I lay on the stone ground, my savior having the opportunity to decide if they wanted to finish the job the little shits had started or not.

My eyes fluttered open and made contact with a black cloak with no feet. Frowning, I forced myself to become more aware as my eyes trailed up the long cloak and over the broad chest to land on a face so familiar to me.

The dark blue eyes on the handsome face shot through me and to the place where I held the little pieces of my previous self.

Dorian. Wait, no. It wasn't Dorian. He looked kind of like him but not exactly. Maybe a relative? Whoever he was, he'd saved me, and I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"You must be Chess' lady friend that's come to save him." He held a hand out to me, which I readily accepted.

"That would be me." I coughed as I came to my feet. "Savior and all that, but you can call me Kat."

"Very well, Kat," he said, his lips twitching at the edges. I knew what he was thinking. My name was Kat and I'm dating a Fae cat. Ironic I know. It wasn't like I hadn't thought of that myself but bringing it up just didn't seem important. Maybe I would just start going by Moderator so people would stop being surprised by it.

"Your feline friend, I am afraid is otherwise occupied, but you are free to wait for him to finish his task." The man who I could only assume was the Reaper moved past me and toward the large doors of the building. Opening up the door, he gestured inside, "Please come into my home."

Raising a wary brow at him, I questioned, "How do I know you aren't just going to hold me prisoner like you are doing Chess? I'm supposed to be saving him from you, not becoming buddies."

The Reaper laughed, he threw his head back, making his dark hair cascade down his back. "I can see why the feline is so taken with you as well as my son."

"Your son?" That had me moving. I had been right, he was related to Dorian. But I would never in all my years have guessed that he was his father. Dorian's dad was the Reaper, who'd have figured. Actually, take that back. With as creepy as his mother was and brooding as Dorian could be, I could totally see those two getting together and making a Fae prince baby.

Not answering my question, he entered the building assuming I would follow. I didn't disappoint and hurried in after him.

Inside, was no different than what I expected a Greek palace to look like. Large columns and high ceilings, it would put my mother's palace to shame.

I didn't pay much attention to the decor as we came upon the top of the room where a large slab of rock sat. On that rock lay Dorian's body wrapped in blue energy and standing next to him was...

“Chess!” I ran across the room and stood by his side. When he didn’t turn immediately at my call I knew something was up. Placing a hand on his shoulder, I dipped around to look at his face.

His eyes were closed and his face scrunched down in concentration. One hand was lying on Dorian’s chest, and the magic surrounding Dorian’s body was wrapped around his hand. Dorian’s veins were filled with black and pulsed under his skin.

“What’s wrong with them?” I asked the Reaper as he came up beside me. I didn’t drop my hand from Chess’ shoulder, just the contact with him made me feel better. I could feel the hole in my heart start to close, and my body felt lighter as if a huge weight had lifted.

“The Shadows are still in my son and your beau is helping me to get them out. Once he has then he will be free to leave this place.”

I frowned hard at the Reaper’s explanation. “But what if he can’t get them out?”

He shook his head, a deep sadness in his expression. “Then they will be both stuck in his mind forever, to forcefully remove him would kill not just my son but possibly him as well. Then it would have been all for naught.”

I looked back to Chess and Dorian, a fist clenched around my heart. I had just found them again and now I was at risk of losing them both. I couldn’t let it happen. I wouldn’t.

I turned to the Reaper with determination on my face. “What can I do?”

He gave me a grim smile. “Exactly what you are. Give him your support. Just being at his side will make him more powerful, and hopefully that will be enough to get them both out alive.”

Hopefully? I didn’t like the sound of that, not one bit.



Chapter 18

Chess

THE ROOM LOOKED as if once upon a time it could have been someone's bedroom. Now, though, it was covered in darkness, the furniture in the room barely visible through the billowing energy coming from one side of the room. Just standing in the doorway made my skin crawl.

"So, what's the plan?" I peeked over at Dorian, who stood by my side, his rigid frame telling me he was feeling exactly what I was feeling if not more so. He'd had this thing inside of him for so long it probably affected him worse than me.

"Plan?" he gave me a quick look before his eyes trained back on the slithering form before us. "What plan? You are supposed to save me, remember? What do you think we should do?"

I was hoping he wouldn't say that. Sure, I had jumped in feet first knowing that the likelihood of me coming out was slim, but I hadn't thought of what to do once we got in here. How the heck were we supposed to expel that massive thing from his body?

My eyes searched the room, my brain scrambling for some sort of idea. I don't know what happened but the next thing I knew I was thrown off balance, a sharp pain in my heart. Kneeling on the ground, I clutched my hand to my chest and hissed.

"Cheshire?" the prince looked down on me. "Are you all right? What was that?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. There was this pain right here." I patted my chest and winced.

"Could your body be being tampered with?"

"I don't think so, the Reaper was standing guard. I doubt anyone would try to mess with us with him there." I thought for a moment, accessing the pain in my chest, and then realized what it was. The hole. The hole was closing up. It had been open so long that the force of it closing had brought me physical pain, and if it was closing that could only mean one thing.

“Kat!” I cried out, jumping to my feet. “She’s here. She’s beside us. I can...I can feel her.” I placed a hand on my shoulder where a weight had appeared.

“Good, then she can watch us both die if we don’t figure out what to do about this,” he said bitterly waving a hand in front of him, “Why not ask her if she has any ideas?”

I gave him a pointed look. “It doesn’t work that way. We are connected, yes, but I’m not in my mind right now, it wouldn’t be possible to contact her. But now that she is here, my magic is complete again.” A slow smirk climbed up my face, and I stretched my arms over my head, a renewed strength plowing through me, filling my veins with power. “And that means these guys don’t have a chance.”

“Powerful or not, we are not going to get far if we do not have a plan,” the prince pointed out with a raised brow.

Unfortunately, he was right. Fattened with power, I was being cocky, and that could get me killed if I approached this the wrong way. My eyes scanned the room once more. They landed on the corner of the room where the darkness was the thickest.

Squinting my eyes, I could barely make out an object on the wall. It was a mirror! That must be where they were latching on to Dorian.

“Do you see that over there?” I tried to discreetly point to the corner of the room. “Do you think if we destroy it then they wouldn’t be able to hold on to you anymore?”

Before the prince could answer me, the malevolent energy in the room started to coil and churn. Screaming voices came from the cloud. They were too jumbled up to make out clearly. The wind from their screams blew at us forcing us back from the doorway and into the hall. The moment we were in the clear, the door slammed shut in front of us.

“I guess that answers that question.” I dusted myself off as I picked myself up off the floor. Dorian climbed to his feet as well, standing beside me with intensity in his eyes that I hoped would never be directed at me.

“They are just playing with us,” he snarled at the door, “they knew we were here the whole time and were just laughing as we quivered in our boots. Now, though,” he pushed his sleeves back with a nasty grin, “We know how to defeat them.”

“Yeah, but they shoved us out. How are we going to get to the mirror to destroy it?” I stared hard at the door envisioning where the mirror was on

the other side. There had to be some way to get to it without getting blasted back out again.

“You leave that to me,” Dorian said with a confidence I didn’t have. “I will be the diversion while you get to the mirror.”

“Right.” I pumped my fists and then gave him a curious look. “What exactly are you going to do?”

“Something very prince-like.” His lips broadened into an all-out grin and then he started for the door. Ignoring the handle, Dorian lifted a foot and kicked the door. It went flying across the room and smashed on the opposite wall.

“Whoa!” I exclaimed at his strength. “If you could do that why didn’t you do it before?”

He shrugged and said, “I just now realized we are inside my head, so that means I can do whatever I want. Thus, kicking down the door.” He gestured to where it lay in pieces on the floor. “Let’s see them keep us out now.”

We stepped back into the room, and the Shadows went berserk. They tried to blow us out again, but we were ready for them this time. Holding our ground, we forced our way in, the shrieking of the lost souls ringing in our ears.

“It’s all you, princey.” I gestured forward.

Dorian frowned at me, probably not liking my nickname for him, before he took a step forward, he held up a finger. “Excuse me.”

The Shadows stopped whipping around the room, their screeches becoming a dull roar. It was interesting that just his voice would command such attention. Probably had something to do with him being the Reaper’s son.

Shrugging at the thought, I watched as he came right up to where the Shadows had conformed together near the bed. The form they made was almost that of a man but without a mouth or eyes to see out of. Dorian didn’t seem to let this bother him, because he started talking to it.

“Are you aware that you are trespassing in my head?”

The Shadows laughed, the sound of it ground on my nerves and burned my ears. “We were invited, you cannot send us away now.”

“Apparently, you do not know when you are not wanted.” He shook a finger at the figure, the absurdity of the act making me smile. “Now, I

command you to leave my head at once.” The haughtiness in his tone left no room for argument, if only the Shadows felt that way.

The Shadows did not take kindly to being commanded, and they reached out for the prince. While the Shadows were busy with Dorian, I made my way over to the mirror. When I stepped into the darkness chills covered my skin, and I had to force myself to walk forward even though everything in me was screaming to turn back.

Just short of crawling, I finally made it to the mirror. Staring into it was a bit strange. The reflection looking back at me wasn't myself. It looked like me but was more of a shadow replica. My eyes glowed and a dark aura surrounded my body, I had to look down at myself to make sure it was actually in the mirror and not what was really happening. Thankfully, it was just my reflection that looked that way. The Shadows were trying to throw me off.

I glanced around for something to break the glass with and found a statue of the queen's head lying on the floor. Reaching down slowly, as to not spook the man in the reflection, I wasn't surprised to see that he did not move with me. I picked the statue up, its heavy weight filling my hands.

Before I could smash it against the glass, though, the man in the mirror spoke, “You do not want to do that, Cheshire.” His voice sounded like mine but with an echoing affect that dashed any illusion of him being me.

“Oh, I assure, I do.” I held the statue up ready to slam it against the glass but was once more stopped by the voice.

“They are lying to you,” the voice of my shadow self said, “they wish you to destroy us because they know we are right. We are Fae and should walk the human world as gods, not cower in fear to their rules and armies.”

My arms let the statue drop slightly, and I leaned toward the mirror as I said, “It is that kind of attitude that had me beaten and parentless before I reached puberty. That high and mighty thinking will only get you killed. I won't let what was done to me be done to anyone else.”

“But we could help you,” he implored, “We could make you a king. Then all those who cast you aside would bow down at your feet. Can't you just imagine it?”

I actually could. When I was younger I had dreamed that very same dream over and over again, hoping one day for it to come true. That was back before I met Kat. Now, I realized that the only way I was going to get what I wanted, and have people look at me the way I wanted them to, was

to make it happen myself. I couldn't control what they thought about me, but I could control how I reacted to them. I wasn't going to be any body's puppet, not anymore.

"Hurry up already, would you?" Dorian's voice cut into my thoughts, and I chanced a glance over to where he was beating off the shadows that were trying to grab him. Looks like the gig was up.

"You can't help me," I said to my reflection, "Only I can help myself, and you? You're done." I smashed the statue against the mirror, and at first, nothing happened. Then a crack started where I had hit it. Just a tiny one, and then that small crack splintered out into more, until the entire mirror was covered with them.

Before he became completely erased the shadow image of myself smiled. "You will regret this, cat. We will make you wish you had taken our bargain."

"Not in this lifetime." As the words fell from my mouth there was an explosion that threw me across the room. The glass shattered, and the piercing screams were back. I clutched my head but it didn't help. They were inside my mind, and I couldn't make them stop. Before long it was too much for me to handle, and everything went black.

The darkness didn't last long, because I was shoved quite forcefully back into my body. My eyes snapped open and I found myself staring up at the face of the one person I had been craving to see. Kat.

"Hey, you. It's nice to have you back." She smiled down at me and then her face changed. She frowned hard, and her eyes glinted with anger. Grabbing me by the shoulders, she shook me with all her might. "Don't you ever do anything like that again! Do you hear me? I thought I lost you!"

She threw me down to the ground and then pulled me up again and into her arms. My eyes wobbled in my head from her treatment. I could only let her hug me. Then when my brain finally settled, I wrapped my arms around her, tucking my face into her neck, just to breathe her in. She smelled like home, and I was never leaving her again



Chapter 19

Kat

I COULDN'T BELIEVE I finally had him back. It felt like forever since I had been in his arms, and now that I was finally here, I couldn't imagine ever letting go.

Chess didn't seem to have any inclination to release me either, and we would have probably stayed like that forever, just holding each other had a throat not cleared near us.

"While, this is all very touching," the Reaper's voice cut into the air, causing Chess and I to pull back from each other but not let go. "We have a bigger problem at hand."

"What's that?" I asked from my spot on the floor where Chess had collapsed.

"While we were able to dispel the Shadows from my body we weren't able to destroy them completely." Dorian stepped over to us. The blue energy no longer covered him and his veins had gone back to normal. I had to say I was relieved to see him like his old self again. I couldn't deal with an evil Dorian much longer.

"Then where did they go?" Chess asked as he climbed to his feet. He held a hand out to me, which I took and let myself be drawn to my feet.

"Right before you two woke up, the darkness in your veins," he directed toward Dorian, "came together to center at your heart. Then all at once it burst out of you and shot into the sky." The way he described it was exactly what had happened. I was paying too much attention to making sure Chess was all right to really get all the gory details, but I had seen the darkness shoot out of Dorian. At that same time though, Chess had collapsed to the ground, so where they went afterward I didn't know.

"They didn't stay here long, probably thought it was best to regroup before trying to attack again. It takes a lot of energy to take a living hosts body and then to be ejected the way they were," the Reaper paused and shook his head, "they are probably licking their wounds out there somewhere." The Reaper shrugged and then pointed toward the entrance.

Our eyes followed his finger to where the door was wide open but no Shadows were in sight.

“All right then.” I clapped my hands and rubbed them together. “Looks like it’s time to hunt down some Shadows.” I grabbed Chess’ hand in mine with a smile that he returned and started toward the door, but I was stopped by the Reaper’s hand on my shoulder.

“No,” he stated, making me frown.

“No? What do you mean no? They got out, they’re not dead yet so that means they can still come back again.” I felt the anger billow up in me at the prospect of having to fight them off once more so they didn’t kill my friends and family. “We can’t give them a chance to get strong again, or we might never destroy them, and next time they might get out into the human world.”

“You are correct.” The Reaper nodded, but he held his hand up before I could interject as to why the fuck he was holding me back. “But this is not your world. You don’t belong here, and if you go searching for the Shadows, you will find more danger for yourself than just the enemy you seek.”

A bit of fear filled me at his words. I’d already had to make it through the fog that didn’t want me here and the glowing leeches that tried to drown me. Who knew what other baddies waited for me out there?

“Then who’s going to go after them, then?” I gestured violently to the door. “It’s partly my fault they are wreaking havoc on the world. I should be the one to stop them. I did it before.”

The Reaper huffed. “And look where that got you. The spell you were given was a temporary fix. It was only meant to get them back here, not to destroy them.”

It wasn’t? Before I could voice my question, Chess stepped in, “Then why did the Seelie Queen give Kat that spell to begin with?” Chess snarled.

“Things are a bit more complicated then all that, my dear Cheshire,” the Reaper said, guilt spreading across his face briefly before it disappeared, but I had seen it and knew why.

“The Seelie Queen knew who really let the Shadows out, didn’t she?” the look I gave the Reaper was accusatory, daring him to lie to my face. I knew the answer to the question. The culprit had told me who the guilty party was already. “You gave her the spell to get them back here so you could clean up yours and Mab’s mess. Am I wrong?”

The Reaper did not say anything for a moment and then looked to Dorian. I could tell that he wanted to tell him he was his father; I could see it on the tip of his lips. But saying so would also mean admitting that the reason that the Shadows got out was because he and Mab had been seeing each other via the mirror in her bedroom, giving the Shadows the perfect escape route.

“Tell him,” Chess interrupted my thoughts prodding the Reaper. “Tell him what he needs to know. It won’t be any easier later.”

Still the Reaper hesitated, but it didn’t matter because Dorian spoke up, “I know already.”

“You do?” his father’s eyebrows lifted at his words.

Dorian gave a bitter laugh and rubbed the back of his neck. “I might have been cursed and more recently overtaken by the Shadows, but that has not affected my ability to see what is right in front of my face,” he paused for a moment putting us all on the edge of our seat, “you’re my father.”

“How...did your mother...?” the Reaper stumbled over his words as Dorian gave him a lopsided grin, one I hadn’t seen in years.

“No, you can feel safe in knowing she never betrayed your trust. I was quite in the dark until I woke up just a few moments ago.” He gave his father a small smile, and shrugged his shoulders. “Seeing you was like looking in a mirror. I just knew.”

The Reaper nodded as if he knew exactly what Dorian was talking about. I was glad one of them did, because I sure as hell didn’t. If I had woke up after fighting for my life, the first thing on my mind wouldn’t be ‘Oh, that guy’s my dad.’ No, it would be more like where is the fucking tequila?

Guess that was one reason Dorian and I would never be good for each other. Which would be a problem if I was not already so over the heels in love with the Fae next to me that looked just as confused as I was.

“Good. Great. Congratulations,” I interrupted them before they started getting all mushy and hugging. “Can we get back to the matter at hand? The Shadows are loose. I can’t go after them. What are we going to do?”

The Reaper looked to me, his face a bit startled by my abruptness. What could I say? I was a people pleaser.

“I apologize.” He bowed his head slightly to me. “I got caught up in the moment. Where were we?”

“You were about to tell everyone that the reason the Shadows got out in the first place was because you and D’s mom here fucked up because you couldn’t keep the secret portal you were using to see each other on the down low.”

Everyone’s eyes, and by everyone, I meant Chess and Dorian’s, turned to the Reaper, whose face was turning a molting shade of purple. I clamped my mouth shut realizing I probably shouldn’t be provoking the guy who would be taking my dead ass to the afterlife. Apparently, almost losing the love of my life again had a negative effect on my need to placate the guy in charge.

“Yes, as you so elegantly put it,” he shot me a nasty glare before looking to his son, “the Shadows were able to leave the Shadow Realm because of your mother and mine’s door way that we kept open so that we may visit each other.” He ran a hand through his hair, a very Dorian like gesture and sighed. “I might be stuck here for the term of my life, but I will be damned if I have to spend it alone.”

“I understand,” Dorian graciously replied, his answer way more eloquent than mine would have been.

“And because it is my fault,” his eyes locked onto me as if daring me to say anything else, but I wasn’t biting. My lips were shut tighter than a church girl’s on Sunday. I gave him a small smile causing him to continue, “It is only fair that I be the one that takes them down the rest of the way.”

“Great.” I clapped my hands together and then searched left and right. “Now that that is settled, how do we blow this joint?”

“Blow this joint?” Dorian glanced at me and then to his father, confusion etched on his face.

“It is a human phrase,” the Reaper explained, “one of many that I myself have never understood.” He shook his head and then crossed his arms. “As for getting out of here, you will not be able to go back the way you came.”

“Good,” I jumped in. “I didn’t particularly want to go through that mess again, and Morgana is not exactly my biggest fan.”

“Morgana?” Dorian asked.

“She fancies herself the Queen of the Shadow Realm,” Chess said with a grin.

“She doesn’t fancy herself anything. She is the Queen of the Shadow Realm,” the Reaper said making Chess’ face fall.

“But why does she live out there and you live here?” Chess gestured toward the large area.

The Reaper’s gaze hardened at the question. “That is a story better left for another time. Now,” he twisted around and stared into a darkened area, “if you are done with your questions, the Shadows are getting further away the longer we stand here talking.”

“Right.” We followed the Reaper until he stopped at a wall. A torch near us lit with a blue flame at our approach.

An metal clinking sounded as the Reaper pulled something out of his pocket. It was a ring of keys. He flipped through them until he stopped on the right one. He held the key out and started to put it into the door.

“Wait.”

The sound of Dorian’s voice caused us to pause and spin around to look at him. “I am not coming with you.”

“You’re not?” I glanced at Chess and then at the Reaper before back to Dorian. “Where else are you going to go? You can’t stay here, and your mother is waiting for you.”

Shaking his head, he trained his eyes on his father’s form. “I can still feel them.” He placed a hand on his chest, and looked down. “Even though they are no longer inside of me it’s like we are still connected. I can feel their anger and their pain.” His eyes turned up, sadness and determination there. “They are hurt but their rage is greater. They won’t stay placated for long. I can help you find them.”

“But wait, you can’t...” I started, but Chess placed a hand on my arm. “You can’t seriously think that it’s a good idea, can you?”

Chess didn’t answer me for a moment as he exchanged a look with the Reaper. It seemed I was missing something, but knowing Chess he would tell me eventually. When he did speak he spoke directly to Dorian.

“I think you should spend some time with your father and chasing the Shadows would be a good opportunity to get to know him and the world he lives in.”

“Thank you for understanding.” Dorian held a hand out to Chess who clasped his hand in his. The look they were exchanging was of mutual respect and some kind of broship that I could never be a part of. What happened while he was in Dorian’s head?

“If you are sure?” the Reaper asked Dorian, an uncertainty in his voice, “then I would glad to have you. They are even harder to deal with in

their spirit form; I could use all the help I can get.”

Frowning, I took a step toward Dorian. “I don’t know what to say,” I gave him a weak smile, “I’m sorry that we didn’t end up the way you wanted us to be.”

He gave me a sad smile. “Our time ended a long time ago, you are a different person now, and you ended up with the best man for you.” His eyes flicked to Chess, who puffed his chest out and wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

“I guess,” I drew out, not exactly sure what was going on. What happened to the arrogant asshole that I’d been dealing with? This new Dorian was freaking me out. Then I met Chess’ eyes, and he nodded at me. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

“Do not worry,” Dorian continued, “this is not goodbye. I still have to find my own happy ending. I am just taking a detour for a little while. Be sure to tell my mother?”

“Of course.” I nodded and then suddenly, without provocation I threw myself at him. Hugging him tight around the waist. Tears slid down my face. “I don’t know why I’m crying,” I said wiping the wetness from my cheeks, and I drew myself away from the now stiff prince.

“It is understandable.” Dorian placed his hands on my shoulder. “You might be Kat, but you still have part of Lynne in you. It is she that sheds tears for me, and that means more to me than you can ever know.”

I blinked up at him and realized he was right. While I was me; I was also Lynne. I couldn’t just ignore my past because it was a part of me and where I am today.

Chess placed a hand on my shoulder, and I turned my gaze to him wondering how he felt about my little outburst. “Are you ready to go home?”

My lips curled up. “Yes, let’s go home.”



Chapter 20

Chess

THE REAPER TWISTED the key in the door lock and turned the knob. Throwing the door open, he gestured for us to head inside.

After being in the dark area for so long, the bright white light coming from the doorway hurt my eyes. Squinting into the opening, my mouth dropped open, and then Kat said the exact words I was thinking.

“You have a door to the Between?”

Eugene gave her such a condescending smile that I wanted to jump in and say exactly what he wasn’t telling Dorian about staying there. But thankfully, I thought better of it and kept my lips zipped.

“You didn’t think I was the Reaper for only the Fae, did you? It would take too long to go all the way through the Underground just to gather souls in your world.”

“No, I suppose not,” she drew out. Something lit up in her eyes, and she pointed a finger at him. “Wait a second. The first time I came to the Between I swore I saw a dark figure out in the middle of it all. Was that you?”

His lips turned up in to a smirk. “I had to see what all the fuss was about. It was the first time a human came into the Between in over a hundred years, I was sure that meant things would be changing soon. And you know what?” he gestured around us with a wide knowing grin, “I was right.”

Chuckling, I grabbed Kat’s hand in mine. “You sure were, and I’m thankful every day that she found her way into our world. I don’t know what I’d have done without her.” The blush that blossomed on her face warmed my heart and even more so when her own emotions became so big that they leaked over into me.

All the love she felt for me engulfed me like a glove, and I had the overwhelming urge to kiss her right then and there. But the way that Dorian and his father were already looking at us said they were getting impatient to get going. So, instead, I led Kat by the hand and toward the door.

“Thank you for everything.” I nodded at the Reaper and then looked to Dorian. “And good luck. I hope to see you again.”

“We both do,” Kat added in, wrapping her arm around me and squeezing me tight. “Now let’s get out of here, we have some lost time to make up for.” Before I could say another word she dragged me out of the Reaper’s home and into the Between.

As we stepped into the Between, the Reaper called out to us, “Just keep going forward, the reception will appear in front of you in no time and above all else, don’t get distracted.”

An unsettling feeling filled me at his words, but Kat dragged me by the hand, not letting me linger on them.

My eyes stayed on the back of Kat’s head. She followed the Reaper’s directions to the letter. After a few minutes, the sight of the reception area in the distance broke up the white blankness around us. Kat and I increased our speed, both of us in a hurry to get home and out of this place.

Before we made it to the reception area though, Kat stopped abruptly. She angled her head toward the side and murmured, “Do you hear that?”

I shook my head. I didn’t hear anything. I opened my mouth to tell her as much, but she let go of my hand and took a step to the left, off the path and away from where our exit was at.

“I swear, I hear a child crying.” She circled around me before stopping back in front of me, her eyes filled with concern. “Are you sure you don’t hear anything?”

“No, I’m sorry, love, I don’t hear anything at all. It’s quiet.” I eyed the door to the human world that was just out of our reach and then glanced back at her. “Too quiet for my liking. Let’s just get home then we can worry about it later.” I placed my hand on her arm, trying to steer her toward our way out, but she jerked away.

“No. I can’t just leave them.” Her eyes widened and the panic on her face slipped into me. “What if it’s lost or hurt? We don’t know what is out there.” She shook her head profusely. “No. We have to find it.”

Kat darted toward where I could only assume she heard the child’s cry. I didn’t hear anything, and I was beginning to think it was part of what the Reaper had warned us about. Not to leave the path for any reason. That’s exactly what Kat was doing. I just got her back. I wasn’t losing her again. Not ever, even if she hated me for it later.

Keeping my eye on the reception area, I let my long legs carry me until I caught up to Kat. I grabbed her by the waist and spun her around. “Kat, pet, we are leaving. It’s a trick to get you off the path and it’s working.”

“No, it’s not a trick,” she yelled at me and tried to twist out of my grasp, “I can hear them, I can.”

“No,” I grabbed both of her arms and looked her dead in the eye, “you can’t. My hearing is ten times better than yours, and if I can’t hear it that means it’s not really there.”

She looked at me for a moment, her face contemplating what I was saying. I almost thought I had gotten through to her but her head angled just slightly enough to give me a warning before she tried to get away from me again. This time though, I picked her up and threw her over my shoulder.

“Put me down!” Kat screamed at me as she beat me with her arms and legs. “I have to get to them. You are killing them by stopping me.”

It broke my heart to have to do this to her, but there was no other way. We didn’t know what was out there, it could be a child, or for all I knew it could be something that ate children. What I did know was neither of us knew enough about the Between to just run out into it without a care. We’d been through enough; let someone else save the day.

I endured Kat’s assault on my person until we got to the reception area where her fighting promptly stopped. The panic in her that I had felt before had dissipated and all that was left was a calm confusion.

“You can let me down now. I’m fine.”

I hesitated for a moment before slowly lowering her to the ground. “Are you all right?” I brushed a stray piece of hair behind her ear with a frown.

“Yes,” she breathed out and then looked out into the void. “The crying stopped, I don’t hear anything now. I don’t know why I freaked out like that.”

“It’s the Between,” I assured her, holding her in my arms in case she decided to bolt again. “The Reaper said it would try to trick us. To make us leave the path.”

“It’s a good thing you were here then,” Kat gave me a small smile and then frowned, “I wonder what is out there.”

“Not anything good, I can assure you.” I walked us over to the door to the human world and twisted the handle. Opening the door, I gestured her

inside with a lopsided grin, “besides, don’t you have enough on your plate, Miss Moderator?”

“Don’t call me that.” she scowled at me and punched me on the arm before dragging me inside the portal with her. Finally, we were on our way home.



Epilogue

Kate

THERE WAS ONE thing I could say about my life now. It's never boring. Not only was I a Seelie Princess, but I was also the moderator for the Fae dwelling in the human world.

What I thought would be an easy job quickly turned into one instance after another. After the initial shock of the Shadows had faded, some of the Fae had gotten it into their heads that it would be okay to do whatever the hell they pleased.

After a few months of jumping from state to state via the mirror portals, I eventually turned to the council in the Underground for help. Together with them, we created another council that would help moderate the Fae on the human side. Now, I was no longer judge and jury but sort of like a bounty hunter. Except without the leather jacket and mullet.

After that, life became a bit easier, and I almost started to have a sense of normalcy. Sometimes I did get called in on random cases by the government. They had since made nice after a visit from the queens' and the council. Seems like my mother knew how to charm the Underground but also presidents as well.

I enjoyed getting called by them on jobs. They were always something fun and exciting. Not like the times my mother asked me for help, which usually involved something painful. Also, they actually paid me. Thank God for my human parent's income, or I'd be out on the streets.

I had been right about Alice. She was a natural born leader. The moment she stepped in to take over as the representative of the Fae community, the easier everything became. I still had to step in every once in a while to knock some sense into those who got out of line, but for the most part, I left everything to her.

Thankfully, Alice eventually moved out of my grandmother's house and into a place of her own in town. Hatter and she were shacking up, not that it was a surprise to anyone. They publicly dated now, but anytime they hold hands or show any kind affection in public, Alice flares up like a

firework. It's pretty hilarious since Hatter seems to do it more and more just to get a reaction out of her.

My own love life? It's not too shabby if I do say so myself. Which I do. While I'm the moderator on the human side, Chess took up his position once more as moderator in the Underground. When we both aren't hunting down mischievous Fae we spend our time at his willow tree or at my grandmother's house.

I hadn't heard from Dorian, but I had heard from his mother. She said he was off with his father, still trying to hunt down the Shadows. They were slippery buggers that was for sure. I didn't envy him one bit. I just hoped they kept them in the Shadow Realm this time; I needed a bit of peace and quiet in my life. Not that my human mother didn't keep me hopping with the rest of them.

The best day of my life was the look on her face when Chess showed her his true form for the first time. Her eyes got as wide as saucers; she looked him over, and then pointed at him while looking at me. "Is he...a cat?"

I had gleefully nodded and then almost jumped for joy when she promptly passed out on her Persian rug. My mother was still cautious around Chess to this day. Which was fine with me, because that meant less time for her to pester me into doing talk shows and the like. It was the little things in life that kept things interesting, really.

My grandmother finally came home from Florida. It took her long enough. I swore she had died and no one thought to tell us. Or maybe they just couldn't find the body.

The moment my grandmother had stepped through the door she wrapped me in a hug and then waved a finger in my face. "I had to find out on my own that my granddaughter was a faerie princess through the television. Why didn't you call me?"

Anyways, she had heard about the Fae incidents on the news and someone had leaked a picture of me that they were broadcasting all over the world. Of course, it was the most atrocious picture they could find. It was one from my senior year at high school, when I'd been going through my Goth phase. So, of course that meant I was in all black and had a scary look on my face. God only knew what the world thought of the heathen that kept the Fae in line. Or, well, tried to.

After apologizing profusely for letting her get blindsided, she wanted to know all the hairy details. How it started. Who the lovely gentleman gracing her living room was? She didn't even try to hide the way her eyes greedily took him in.

I chuckled and exchanged a look with Chess who was already well on his way to charming the pants off of her, and I said, "Well, it's a long story. You see, it all started one night with this damn rabbit."

I hope you enjoyed the first part of the Underground Series!
Never fret the story isn't over yet! Check out Alice's story in [The Crimes of Alice](#).





Chasing Heart

An Underground Prequel



Prologue

CHILDREN IN THE FAE world are hard to come by. It's been twenty years since a child was born. Even longer since a royal child. So, it came as no surprise that when the Queen of the Seelie Court had a daughter, the whole Underground would come out to rejoice.

While the human world was celebrating their Yule, the residents of the Underground, the Seelie, and the UnSeelie Fae, came together in the grand hall of the Seelie Court. Higher and Lower Fae alike were welcome to party and pay respects to the new princess. For the first time in over a hundred years, no one was turned away from their doors.

The Queen and King of the Seelie Court stood at the front of the room upon a raised dais. They watched the crowd with matching blue eyes and both had hair as white as snow. They were fair and justice rulers and their people respected them above all else. Why else would they all come to see the newborn princess?

In middle of the dais, for the entire Underground to see, sat a cradle with gold and white ribbons and bows. Inside lay a tiny pink and wrinkled child, with hair as white as her parents and eyes as blue as the sea. Each citizen that passed by oh'd and awe'd at the little princess wrapped in a silken gown.

Her father, the king, placed a hand on the cradle and bent down to caress the top of his daughter's head. "You will be the light of the kingdom, my dear, just you wait."

"She won't be anything if we don't get this line moving," his queen responded back. Labor had been hard on her and the standing around was harder on her still. The king was surprised she hadn't blasted them all with how short her temper had been through her pregnancy. She had promised to try to keep her raging hormones in check; a snide remark was the least of his worries.

"Don't worry, dear, there aren't that many more." He pressed a kiss to the side of her head and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Besides, Seer hasn't even been through yet, and you so wanted to hear what he had to say."

Frowning, the queen patted his hand and nodded. "I suppose you are right, but next time we have a child we are making sure he is first in line."

"Next time?" the king smiled down at her with surprise. "You want more children?"

"Of course I do. It would be a pity for our little girl to grow up with no siblings to play with. Though, I do hope the next one does not kick as much." She made a pained face that made the king chuckle.

"We can have as many as you like, and we will proclaim that Seer is first in line for every one of them. That should make the old man happy."

The queen snorted. "If he is still a man at that point. You know how he is, changing his appearance every hundred years or so. Next time he could be a woman." Her lips curled up in the first real smile all evening. "Could you imagine? A female Seer. Now that is not something I would want to miss."

"Nor I." The king laughed along with her until his eyes caught sight of someone in the progression of visitors. "Now, here is someone you will be delighted to see I'm sure of it."

Coming up the dais in all of her dark glory was the UnSeelie Queen. Her dark hair was pulled back, and she wore a dress that shimmered in the light, she glided up the steps with her son, Dorian, at her side.

"Cousin," the queen held her hands out to her, "how wonderful of you to come. I haven't seen you since young Prince Dorian's last birthday." She pressed air kisses to each side of the UnSeelie Queen's cheek and then bent at the waist to greet the young prince.

"How are you, my dear?" she cocked her head to the side, taking in the child before her. In fae years he was already over fifty but in human years he still looked as if he had yet to reach his tenth birthday. Though, the fierce intelligence that shot out of his eyes would never make anyone believe he was less.

"Fine," he growled between clenched teeth.

"Dorian!"

His sapphire eyes snapped to his mother, and he ducked his head at her chastising glare, his black hair hanging over his face.

"Sorry," he muttered, scuffing his foot on the floor.

"I'm sorry, cousin. He has hit that rebellious stage that demands he make everything a battle. I'm lucky to be able to get him out of the outskirts long enough to go to a lesson. He is obsessed with those damn opalaughts."

She rolled her eyes at him. "You'd think as a fae, he hadn't seen a dozen or more in his lifetime. They do breed like rabbits." The dark haired queen shook her head, her hand placed on her son's shoulder to keep him from causing another outburst.

"No worries." The king chuckled; his eyes alight with glee. "I'm sure we will have our own hellion to worry about soon enough."

The UnSeelie Queen gave him a small smile in return before turning her gaze to her cousin. A frown marred her face as she asked, "I know it might not be the appropriate time, but while we are here, I was wondering if you had thought any more about that issue we had discussed before?" her voice lowered, and her eyes darted around to make sure she wasn't heard. "About the shadows?"

"No, I hadn't thought about it, and you are quite right, now is not the time to be discussing such depressing issues," the Seelie Queen snapped before letting a brilliant smile that did not reach her eyes cover her face, "It is a celebration after all. The humans can mark this day as Yule for the rest of time but today will always be the glorious day we had a Seelie Princess come into the world."

The king placed a hand on her waist, giving her a comforting squeeze. "Quite right. Quite right." He nodded his head, pretending not to notice the way his wife's magic flared against his hands.

The time to talk about what plagued their realm was fast approaching, but for now, the king and queen preferred to linger on happier thoughts. Their daughter would only have one time to shine and they wouldn't let it be spoiled by talk of shadows and such nasty things.

The UnSeelie Queen nodded in understanding though she wasn't content with their answer. She led her son down the dais and into the rest of the party all the same.

"She almost let it slip."

"But she didn't," the king countered, "your cousin is smarter than you think. She wouldn't want to cause an uproar in the kingdom anymore than you would. Have faith that she will do the right thing." He brushed his hand along the side of her face with a reassuring smile before his mouth widened as something behind her caught his attention.

"Ah, here he is now. See, I told you he would be along soon." The king opened his arms gesturing toward the next figure in the line.

“Yes, you did. Now go get him.” She gave her husband a little push toward the one they had been waiting for.

The fae in question was an UnSeelie fae that was respected by all the Underground. He wasn’t royalty. He wasn’t even pleasant. In most cases, he was a grouchy old fart who didn’t care about anything but his pipe. One that he had, unfortunately, brought to the Seelie Princess’s celebration.

“Seer, how nice to finally see you.” The queen waved a hand in front of her face, trying not to sneeze at the sickly sweet smell coming from the pipe in his hand.

“Well, I would have been here sooner had you not invited the whole Underground.” Seer sniffed taking a large puff from his pipe with one of his six sets of hands, his blue lips puckered around the end. His large belly filled most of the space between them as he adjusted his fuzzy coat, a darker blue than his own skin.

“I apologize, old man.” The king clapped Seer on the back with a smile. “We couldn’t hold back our joy. It had to be shared with everyone.” He gestured a hand down to their daughter who had awoken from her nap to gaze upon the blue creature above her.

“I can see why you would.” Seer took a step toward the cradle but was stopped by the queen who held her hand out to him. He looked down at her hand, frowning before handing his pipe over to her.

Seer leaned forward placing his top set of hands on the edge of the crib. His eyes, an obsidian color, gleamed under the lights as he called upon the magic that allowed him to see the future.

The king and queen watched in awe waiting for him to come out of his trance. The thing Seer was known for was just that, seeing things. The past, the present, and the future. All of them were open to him. Unfortunately, dictating what parts he saw was not.

Leaning back from the crib, he held his hand out to retrieve his pipe. Placing the tip of it in his mouth, his face creased in apprehension. Whatever he had seen was not something he wanted to share.

“Well?” the queen questioned, anxiety filling her at his silence.

He puffed out a cloud of smoke being sure to turn his head away from the child and then turned on his heel. He stopped at the bottom of the dais before changing his mind and coming back up the stairs.

“She will be beautiful and loved, like her mother.” His words eased the tension in the king and queen’s hearts. “But there is danger in her future and

you must beware.”

“Beware?” the king stepped forward clasping his hand with his wife’s. “Of what?”

Seer became uncomfortable, shifting this way and that. He wouldn’t meet them in the eye as he said, “Love.”

“Love?” the queen cried out, her eyes dashing around her quickly before lowering her voice. “What do you mean? What does love have to do with it?”

“Your daughter will indeed be beautiful and loved by all that know her, but your love will be her downfall.” His dark eyes locked with the queen’s in warning. “Children are a great many things but hold on too tightly...” he shook his head as he trailed off.

“Thank you, Seer.” The king ushered the man away, his eyes lingering on his silent queen.

Once Seer was well away, the king came back to his wife’s side. She had a dazed look on her face as if she wasn’t really there. Her hands were clasped in front of her, a confused frown etched on her face.

“Darling?” the king asked placing a hand on her shoulder. “Are you all right?”

Jerking away from his grasp, her eyes cleared, and she rounded on him with a snarl. “How could I be all right? He practically just said I was going to kill her with my love!”

“Shh!” he gestured with his hand for her to keep it down, the fae that were still coming through the line were starting to whisper amongst themselves about the queen’s display.

“Calm yourself, my love.” He grabbed her by the shoulders and looked her in the eyes. “Remember, Seer only sees what might happen in the future, not what will happen. And what he says isn’t always what he actually saw. You know this. Don’t take what he said to heart, we will love and care for our daughter as if he has said nothing at all.”

“But that’s what will hurt her, don’t you see?” she pushed his hands away and went to the edge of the crib. Her eyes gazed down at her little baby girl. Her heart ached in her chest as she watched her smile at one of the brownies that had been making faces at her.

How could she ever hurt such a precious thing? From the moment she was born she had been her world. The very thought that she could hurt her in any way was foreign to her.

“I won’t let anyone ever hurt you. My daughter, my precious Lynne.”
The queen held her daughter in her arms, all the love she had pouring down on the little princess. But inside, inside her heart had begun to freeze and ice.



Chapter 1

Lynne

GROW. I THOUGHT AS I pressed my magic into the dirt surrounding my fingers.

My magic swirled inside my stomach and then shot up and out through my fingertips. Bright green strings of light spread through the earth, filling it with life. I smiled as sprouts popped up all along the dirt bed in the royal garden. I pushed just a bit more magic into the ground before leaning back on my heels.

Dusting the excess dirt off of my hands, I surveyed my work. Many would think being able to give life to plants was a small thing but I say they can stuff it.

Plants were one of the best gifts the world could give us. All plants needed was water, sunshine, and love. They didn't argue. They didn't try to manipulate you into doing things you wouldn't normally want to do. Unlike Fae, particularly, my mother.

"I knew I would find you here," my father's voice, a deep timber forced me from my thoughts.

"Where else would I be? It's not like I'm allowed to leave the palace." I didn't even try to hide the bitterness in my voice.

"Now, daughter, don't be like that," he started, kneeling down beside me but I jumped to my feet, the dirt that had gathered on my skirt fluttering to the ground.

"I have a name," I snapped.

My father, Oberon, King of the Seelie Court, may look like my brother to an outsider with his flawless skin and shiny pale-colored hair, but he was actually closer to a century than my measly hundred. The only feature that gave away his age was his eyes. Wise and weary from all his years, even they could not hide all he had seen. I only wished he would trust me enough to tell me.

"You know the rules, daughter." He stood to his feet, an understanding look on his face. "We are not to use our true names anymore."

"It's a stupid rule. Even mother does not abide by it."

“Your mother lives by a different set of rules than we do.” He shook his head. “But the rule is in place for a reason.” When I opened my mouth to argue he added, “One that cannot be argued. Even if you do not understand it.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I turned away from him. I wasn’t going to get anywhere with him.

The Fae world was all about rules. You can’t do this, you can only do that. But more recently, and the most annoying was the new one about saying your real name.

It was utterly ridiculous. No one was going to get taken because the shadows whispered at him or her in the dark. At least that’s what they said would happen.

Call me a skeptic but I didn’t believe it.

“Anyway, I am here on a more important matter than arguing about what cannot be changed,” my father continued.

I frowned. I knew what he wanted to talk about, and I didn’t want to talk about it anymore than he wanted to fight about mother and her stupid rules.

“Now, I know that it’s not how you imagined you would find your spouse but it really is for the good of everyone.” He placed his hand on my shoulder and spun me back around to face him.

“You mean good for Mother,” I spat.

The soothing look on my father’s face changed to that of concern. “Your mother just wants the best for you as do I. And we both agreed this would be the best way to keep you safe.”

“And gain more power,” I snorted, “Don’t try to pretend like this is about me. It’s all about Mother not being settled with enough. She will always want more power and she will give up anything to get it. Even her own daughter.”

My father sighed and dropped his hands from my shoulders. “I don’t know why I even bother. You are headstrong just like your mother.”

“Only good bit I got from her,” I muttered.

That wasn’t exactly true. My mother, Queen Titania of the Seelie Court, was known to be the most beautiful of the realm. With long pale blonde hair and ice blue eyes, she was the envy of everyone at court. Sadly, I had taken after her looks, and by my father’s judgment, her temperament.

Too bad I couldn't force myself to not feel anything like she did. If I could kill one of my own kind as easily as she did, then I probably wouldn't care about who I married, only about when I would get my next fix.

Though, killing a Fae wasn't as easy as just lopping their head off. No, my mother was crueler than that. She'd rather throw them to the Shadow Realm to waste away on their own rather than do the dirty deed herself.

When she wasn't out casting half the kingdom, the rest were imprisoned in glass mirrors. Which to me was a fate worse than death.

I glanced down at the plant that was thriving from my magical touch. It was bad enough I was forced to stay in the palace. If I were locked away from the light and air it would kill me, no need to wait for my powers to wane.

Moving my gaze from the plant and back to my father I asked, "When is this so called betrothed showing up, anyway?"

"The UnSeelie Prince will be here within the fortnight. You should prepare to look your best for the occasion. We want to make a good impression." My father's lips ticked up slightly, obviously relieved that I wasn't going to argue anymore.

My face scrunched at his words.

I'd never been out of the palace, so it was no surprise that I didn't know anything about the UnSeelie Court aside from what I read about in books.

While they had some of the most beautiful High Fae, it was said that their Lower Fae were not more than animals. The Seelie Court was all about structure and playing the game of Court. The UnSeelie Court preferred to wear their emotions on their sleeve doing whatever they liked whenever they liked with no thought to the consequences around them.

Tucked away in the library they had seemed so fascinating to me, and now I would not only get to meet one but I was to marry one. I couldn't imagine how that would go. Would they throw me over their shoulder like a barbarian and drag me back to their kingdom? Or would they not even wait until the wedding night and ravish me on the ballroom floor?

The thought of either caused a flutter of excitement and terror to fill me. Thankfully, my father's voice pulled me out of my panic.

"Daughter?"

My eyes jerked to his, and I nodded. "I will be fine. Don't worry."

No UnSeelie Prince would make a fool of me. I'd make sure of it.



Chapter 2

Dorian

THE GLASS SHATTERED AGAINST the wall. The piercing scream from the irate woman in my room made my ears ring.

“I can’t believe you are doing this to me!” a luscious brunette snarled at me, her state of undress not a worry to her.

My eyes briefly drifted down to her bared breasts before I sighed and rolled my eyes. “I am hardly doing anything to you. It is not like I have a choice in the matter.”

This didn’t seem to placate her any, because she stomped her foot and growled, “You are the crown prince of the UnSeelie Court, you don’t answer to anyone! If you didn’t want to get married, then you wouldn’t have to do it.”

I ran a hand through my own dark hair, the length of it brushing the middle of my back. It should probably get cut soon. I didn’t want to displease my bride to be. But who knew what kind of men she was into. If she were anything like her mother then it didn’t matter what I looked like, she’d hate me either way.

“Are you even listening to me?”

I sighed once more. I really didn’t need this now. “Of course I am, Bianca.” Stepping over to her, I slid my arms around her waist drawing her soft form against my hard chest. “Let us not fight. We do not have much time left before I am to be exiled to the other side.” I tried to kiss her, but she turned her head away from me, her ruby red eyes glaring at me.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” She placed her hands on my chest and shoved me away. Marching over to where her discarded clothing lay on my bedroom floor, she jerked them on. “I am not just some toy you can take out of your drawer and play with whenever you like. I have feelings, Dorian.”

“Could have fooled me,” I muttered.

Bianca and I had only been seeing each other for a few weeks. I thought we had both been on the same page. My reputation didn’t exactly paint me as the flowers and romance kind. I’d rather explore the hills and valleys of the female body than explore the depths of our feelings. For

Reaper's sake, I didn't even know her last name or favorite color. It was hardly a basis for a relationship. Her outrage was completely uncalled for.

Not bothering to put my own clothing on, I crossed my arms over my chest and waited for Storm Bianca to subside. Unfortunately for me that didn't look like it would happen anytime soon.

"And another thing! If your mother thinks that marrying off her only son to that ice queen's brat will help our kingdom, she is crazier than Hatter!"

The mention of the silver-haired Seelie Fae that currently resided in the dark forest made me frown. I didn't know his story exactly. He'd come to my mother seeking refuge from the Seelie Queen's rage a few years ago. My mother, of course, had granted it, as I would have done as well. Everyone was welcome in the UnSeelie Court. We weren't biased to looks and power like other Fae. But there was something about the man that was unsettling. Something had happened to him on the other side but he would never say what, no matter how much I asked.

Shrugging off the thought of the Hatter, I grabbed my trousers from the floor. "I trust my mother and so should you." I dragged the pants on while giving Bianca a pointed look.

"Of course I trust the queen." Bianca's expression quickly softened. She placed her hand on my chest, her eyes down as she stroked my chest. "I just don't like it."

Placing my hand on hers, I gave it a tight squeeze. "I do not care for it either but we deal the cards we are dealt. And it is my turn to play the game."

Her lips turned down in a frown. "Be careful. Those Seelie aren't like us. They wear their smiles like a suit of armor. You won't know if they will strike until it's too late."

I chuckled her under the chin and smiled. "Do not worry about me, dear Bianca. I play to win and I never lose."

I sent Bianca on her way with the promise to call for her when I came back from meeting my new bride. Then with the heavyweight of duty on my shoulders, I made my way to the orchard.

The UnSeelie Court was a precarious mistress, ever changing on a whim. It made the best defense against outsiders, but it was a headache for anyone who wished to map the land. It had never bothered me. I loved the land more than any woman I had ever been with. I enjoyed rediscovering

her curves each day. I would certainly never bore of her like I would have other women.

My feet sank into the soil as I stepped into the orchard, the only place that never changed and my haven from the rest of the Fae world. Rows and rows of trees filled the area. There were workers that cared for the vegetation, I was sure of it, but I had never seen them. Lower Fae like those who worked the fields were more of the shy type. They preferred to do their work away from prying eyes. Not that I could blame them. I would not want to be gaped at all day either.

Sighing, I leaned against my favorite tree that sat above all the others. I could see the whole orchard from here and they had the most delicious oranges, far superior to any other I had ever tasted. Here I could relax and let my troubles roll off me.

I took a deep breath in and let it out slowly. Then frowned. The heaviness was still there. It usually worked but for some reason today my haven wasn't doing it.

The brush of fabric against the ground pulled my attention from the view. I didn't need to turn to see who it was. Only one person would dare bother me here.

"Hello, Mother."

"Hello, darling." Skirts as black as night came into view. As a child, the gowns she wore always reminded me of spider webs. When I had told her she had just laughed and patted my head. "Dorian dear, you are more perceptive than you know."

I hadn't known then what she meant, but now I knew that she wrapped herself in clothing such as that to put up a defense. While the Seelie Court might hide behind their smiles, my mother hid behind a fearsome facade. One that most of her citizens knew was just a mask. No, Mab was softer than mush but had a wicked temper if betrayed. I'd only witnessed it once and the thought of it still made my spine tingle.

"What are you doing out here?" She stood by my side not touching me but her presence was comfortable, nonetheless.

"Thinking."

Her dark blue eyes, so much like my own crinkled at the corners, her lip ticked up at my answer. "You mean, procrastinating."

I shot her a smile. "That as well."

Her head fell back as she laughed, the smooth surface of her face contorted showing her age. If anyone didn't know us, they would think we were siblings. The rate at which we aged made it almost impossible to tell who was the parent and who was the child. It made for interesting situations at parties that was for sure.

"Ignoring the obvious reasons you are hiding," she cleared her throat with a hand over her mouth, "while you are leaving another has come."

"Oh, really?" I asked my brow quirking up.

"Yes," her eyes sparkled, "a small little thing with golden curls and a peculiar disposition. Could make for some interesting events to come."

Shaking my head at her, I laughed. "Your interest in the humans is so strange. They are pests that are better left to their own devices. Having them in our world is not good for any of us. Say one of them goes missing?" I asked my lips pressed into a line. "Then they would be beating down the door of our world in moments. Don't think for one moment they are our friends."

She placed her hand on my arm; the blood red of her nails glinted dangerously. "You worry too much. We need them as well, you know. They depend on them to survive. One here and there won't hurt anything. And besides," the smile on her face was positively wicked, "she's just a child. How much trouble could she cause?"

I didn't have an answer, but I had a sinking feeling in my gut telling me that this child could cause more trouble than any of us could ever imagine.



Chapter 3

Lynne

RIDICULOUS! THIS WHOLE SITUATION was utterly and completely barbaric. My shoes made angry sounds as I stomped through the hallways of the palace. I'd just come from my mother, where she had requested my presence with the Court.

She never requested my presence. If she had her way I'd be locked away in a tower only brought out for special occasions. I sometimes wondered why she even bothered to have me at all.

Any other time I'd have been overjoyed to go to court but this time I'd have rather stuck my head in the dirt. Not only did she want to talk about my upcoming marriage, but also she had to ask in front of everyone if I was prepared to do my wifely duties. She might as well have asked if I was ready to spread my legs for a complete stranger rather than being coy about it. The whole court had laughed at my blushing face either way.

If she wanted me to be prepared, she shouldn't have kept me so cooped up all these years. The only experience I had with men and sex were from books and the stories my best friend Erydesa told me.

Unlike me, she could do what she liked and when she liked, which she took full advantage of by sleeping her way through most of the royal court. Fae weren't prudes by any means, but to someone like me that wasn't even allowed to be alone with a male, it seemed a bit extreme.

Even when she retold the tales of her nightly and sometimes even daily activities, I couldn't help but be in awe of her and the whole aspect of sex. Some of the things she has had done to her or have done to others made me laugh and blush. Who used feathers as a way to get in the mood? And being tied down? I couldn't imagine ever giving up that much control to someone else.

The thought of what my future husband might like crept up, but I quickly shook it off. I didn't care what he liked. I wasn't marrying him. I'd sooner die.

My face settled into a firm determination as I made my feet start toward the library. Rounding a corner I bumped into a hard chest and

almost lost my footing. Large hands grabbed me before I hit the ground and a familiar chuckle filled my ears.

“Pardon me, your highness.” Bastian, Erydesa’s twin brother, grinned at me. His hair was almost as white as my own, but his blue eyes were more of a muddy blue. He and Erydesa had the same position on sex and dressed to show off their assets. Having grown up with Bastian, the first time he started going without a shirt my face had heated to volcanic levels. Then when he had pierced his nipples I couldn’t look at him for days.

My eyes went to the glinting jewels on his chest and my face heated. I forced my eyes to look to the side causing Bastian to laugh. Miffed at being laughed at I pulled away from him and smoothed my dress down. “What are you doing here Ba—Jewels,” I caught myself before I called him by his real name. These nicknames were really irritating though I didn’t need to ask why Bastian had decided to go by Jewels.

Not mentioning my slip up, Bastian moved back into my personal space. “I wanted to check on you of course.”

“Why?”

“Well, you know, after what happened in court I thought you might need a shoulder to cry on.” He picked up a piece of my hair and twirled it between his fingers. I had the sudden urge to wash it again. It was no secret that Bastian wanted me. He’d come on to me enough times I would think he’d take the hint that I wasn’t interested. Unfortunately, he was one of the few males my mother let me be around. If all the other males were like him I wasn’t sure I wanted get to know them.

“I’m all right,” my lips twisted, and I slowly withdrew from his touch and added, “But thanks for your concern.”

I moved around him and resumed my path to the library where I hoped to drown myself in some ancient literature. Bastian, on the other hand, couldn’t take the hint, as usual. I rolled my eyes as his footsteps echoed mine.

“Did you need something else?” I asked, my eyes forward hoping if I was dismissive enough he’d leave me be.

We came up on one of my favorite hiding spots and without a word, Bastian grabbed my hand and pulled me into the darkened corner.

Struggling against his hands, confusion filled my face. “What the hell?”

Bastian's hand straddled either side of my shoulders as he leered at me. "Come on, your highness. Let's not pretend any longer."

"Pretend what?" I raised a brow at him.

"That there isn't some kind of attraction between us." One of his hands came up to stroke the side of my face and I flinched away from him. "Your mother has a point."

"What?" Anger overwhelmed my disgust. My mother was never right.

"You need to be prepared. You aren't like my sister and I. You are delicate. Innocent." He plucked at the collar of my dress, and I shoved his hand away. Bastian sighed and dropped his hands. "I'm just trying to say that we are counting on you to make this alliance work, and that means you need to keep that UnSeelie bastard happy."

"Keep him happy?" I exclaimed. "What about keeping me happy?" But it was like I wasn't even speaking.

Bastian grabbed me by the hips and pressed himself against me. "That's where I can help you."

"Help me do what exactly?"

"Help you learn how to please him, of course." Bastian ground against me, letting me feel the hardness between his thighs. "Don't you want your first time to be special? For the one who takes you to be someone you know? Not with some stranger who doesn't give a shit about you other than to gain power?"

Having had enough I conjured up some of my magic and shoved at him, forcing him off me. Bastian's eyes widened, and he lost his balance causing him to crash to the floor. My lips formed a tight smile as I stared down at him.

"Now let me help you, Jewels," I scowled, "I am High Fae, and while I might be inexperienced in some areas of the world, I am also the daughter of one the most powerful Fae in the whole Underground. No one will be taking me." I turned away from him but then paused and glanced over at him still sprawled out on the ground. "And for the record, it would never be you. Never."

The sound of Bastian's cursing was music to my ears as I stomped away. Help me? I snorted. If anyone needed help, it'd be that UnSeelie Prince. He didn't know what he was getting into, and if I had my way, he'd be the one eating out of the palm of my hand. Not the other way around.



Chapter 4

Dorian

WE ARRIVED EARLY IN the morning. And when I say we, I mean two guards and me. The Seelie Queen wouldn't allow me to bring any more people. More than likely she didn't want any more dirty UnSeelie crowding her palace.

I snorted, causing one of the Lower Fae unpacking my things to look up. The short, meek male could have been High Fae had they been taller and more attractive. I honestly was surprised the Seelie Queen would lower herself to let anyone not like her even be in the palace, let alone handle anyone's things. But for all, I knew the Lower Fae could have been assigned to me because I wasn't worthy of one of her own serving me.

"Your highness?" the servant asked, his eyes down.

"Nothing." I shook my head and then paused. "Wait, what can you tell me about the princess?"

At the mention of the princess, the servant's eyes darted up from the floor and then quickly back to the ground. "The princess is wonderful. A warm embrace in a cold winter storm." The love and adoration in the servant's voice surprised me even more so since he kept going. "There are no words to describe her beauty and grace. The very definition of—"

"I get it," I cut him off, "she's a goddess."

"No! Not a goddess," the servant cried out but then quickly lowered his voice. "A goddess would not seek to acknowledge those lower than her. Her Highness is beyond any of those such things. You are a lucky Fae indeed to be engaged to such as she."

"I see," I drew out raising a brow at him. I wasn't sure how I felt about marrying someone who was thought so highly of by her people. It was great for being a leader, not so much when trying to woo them.

"Is there anything else I can help you with, your highness?"

"No, no. That is all. Thank you." I waved him off and turned back to the room they had put me in. Thankfully, the servant hurried out of the room and I was alone once more. The room was furnished well enough, but

it was nothing compared to the room I had back home and it wasn't going to help me with the princess.

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I sighed. I had only just gotten here, and I was already ready to go home. Fortunately, I'd only had a few encounters with Seelie Fae throughout my last hundred years or so. The few times I had gotten together with them hadn't been pleasant. Everything took effort. Every word, every facial expression was being judged all the time. One wrong look at the wrong person and you could find yourself in the Seelie Queen's dungeon. I'd heard it was even worse than being exiled to the Shadow Realm, and I could believe it. Speaking of good impressions, I doubted the queen would like it if I wandered her halls in mud covered clothing.

I dragged my shirt off letting it fall to the floor. I thought for a moment to just leave it there, let them think the man they were giving their precious princess to was a slob but remembering the servant who had cowered, not daring to meet my gaze made guilt eat at me. Sighing, I leaned down to pick up the shirt from the ground. Throwing it onto the bed on my way to the wardrobe, I dug through my clothes and frowned. I really shouldn't have let my mother pack for me. There was nothing but frills and furs. Sometimes I wondered if she had wished for a daughter.

Rolling my eyes, I grabbed the shirt with the least bit of frills and paired it with a pair of black pants. There was one thing my mother, and I had in common and that was our love of black. There wasn't a speck of color in my wardrobe, which was just the way I liked it. Compared to the Seelie I would stick out like a sore thumb.

The thought made me smile. It would piss the queen off to no end for sure. A knock on the door drew my attention away from the wardrobe. Before I could answer the door, it was pushed open and a long legged blonde walked in.

"So you're him, huh?" the unimpressed sneer on her face did nothing to mar her beauty. Long pale hair swung behind her as she strutted into my room. The high slit in the dress she wore gave me a glimpse of her shapely legs when she took a step. The sparkle in her eye when I finally met her gaze told me she knew I was looking, and she knew how good she looked. No way this was the princess.

"And you are?" I gestured to her as she stopped in front of me. Her eyes roamed over me, pausing at my bare chest that I couldn't help but puff

out at the attention.

“Don’t worry about me. It’s you who you should be worried.” She pointed a perfectly shaped nail at me.

“Is that so?” I smirked and crossed my arms over my chest, which drew her attention to my biceps. She gave them a long appreciative look before sniffing.

“You listen here, princey.”

Princey? I laughed to myself but didn’t respond.

“The woman you are going to be marrying isn’t just some slop that you can use once and toss aside.” I opened my mouth to defend myself but she cut me off, “Don’t think we don’t know about your reputation. Women talk, even across realms.” the positively lethal tone of her voice made me flinch.

“She’s worth way more than her mother is trying to sell her off for.” The bitterness that had come into her voice caught my interest. So far everyone loved the princess but hated the mother. It was good information to tuck away for later.

“I am beginning to see that,” I responded, catching her off guard. Slipping one arm and then the other into my shirt I let it hang off of me without buttoning it up. “Your princess seems to have quite the fan base.”

My visitor opened her mouth, but I kept going, “But since you have heard of me. I am sure you are aware of my tendency to win, and while your princess might be fantastic and all, that does not make her immune to my charms.”

This made the woman laugh, but I ignored her and continued, “My mother wishes me to marry the Seelie Princess, so that is what I will do and no one, not even the princess herself will keep me from getting what I want. Do you understand?” I tipped her chin up with a smug grin.

The blonde seemed dumbfounded for a moment before she busted out laughing. Pushing my hand away, she shook her head. “You keep thinking that, princey.” She laughed once more and headed toward the door. Stopping at the doorway, she glanced back at me one more time before chuckling again. “This is going to be fun.” She snickered before closing the door behind her.

Well, that wasn’t encouraging.



Chapter 5

Lynne

I SAT IN THE library with my legs thrown over the side of a chair. I was so immersed in my book that I didn't realize anyone had come in until a pair of hands covered my eyes.

A wide grin spread across my face as I giggled. "Gab!"

"How did you know it was me?" my best friend, Erydesa, also known as Gab, dropped her hands.

Shaking my head, I dropped my legs and closed my book. "Because you are the only one immature enough to do such a thing."

Ignoring my comment, she grabbed me by the arm and dragged me out of my seat. "Come on. I know you've been in here longer than is healthy. You need to get some fresh air."

I snorted but let her lead me out of the library and down the hallway and out into the gardens. I had no doubt that she had something up her sleeve. Erydesa rarely did anything for anyone's good but her own.

"Did you hear? The UnSeelie Prince arrived today." She wasted no time saying as she walked arm and arm with me along a path in the garden.

"I had heard such news." More than one person had told me today that the UnSeelie Prince had arrived. Some were delighted to let me know, others more in a cautionary tone. Of course, most of those came from the servants. The High Fae wouldn't be caught dead showing me their worry.

In fact, the very servant that was assigned to attend to his royal pain in the butt, Gerald, had come to me just before Erydesa had. The quiet Fae had explained everything that had happened with the prince. Including, how he had asked about me. What Gerald had told the prince about me was flattering and not at all true, but I could just imagine what the prince must think of me now. The thought actually made me smile.

Gab chuckled beside me. "Don't sound so excited about it. Someone will start to think you care about your betrothed."

"Hardly." I snorted, playing with the ends of my pale blonde hair. "Everyone knows that this is a marriage of convenience. Nothing more."

“Sure it is, but have you seen him yet? Don’t you want to know what he looks like?” Smiling at me, Gab trailed a hand along the metal fence lining the garden path.

I quirked a brow at my friend’s mischievous grin. “Why would I want to do that? I’m supposed to marry him whether or not I approve of his appearance.”

“Well, I would want to know whose bed I’ll be warming for the rest of eternity.” Gab stopped in her tracks, pulling me with her. “And as you are my best friend and confidant, I did a little reconnaissance on your behalf.”

“Of course you did.” I rolled my eyes. The younger Fae always needed to know what was going on with everyone in the palace. It was for her own pleasure and hardly a selfless act in the name of friendship.

Gab sniffed. “Well, if you’re going to be like that, I don’t think I’m going to tell you what I found out.” She stuck her nose in the air, pretending to be cross.

“Yes, you will. You can’t help yourself.” I dropped her arm and continued down the path, my attention half on the surrounding flowers.

Having never left the palace, I’d seen them all hundreds of times over. I’d never even seen all of the Seelie Court, but I was supposed to marry a complete stranger, and live with him all for the sake of solidifying our defenses against some shadow creature?

The hope of leaving the palace was the only reason I even considered the sham of a marriage, to begin with. If it gave me the chance to be free, to see new places, and to finally walk through the halls of my own home without the fear of who would lose their heads next. I didn’t need to know what my husband looked like. I’d marry him all the same. Though, I’d be damned if I made it easy for him.

“Oh all right, you’ve talked me into it.” Gab gave an exaggerated sigh and hurried to catch up with me. “You know all you had to do was ask.”

“But I didn’t ask.”

Gab ignored me and continued babbling, “So, I went down to the guest wing where they keep all the important people. Not that UnSeelie royalty is all that important, but anyway, I got stopped by one of his brute guards—”

As she told her story, I could feel the excitement as it radiated off her in waves. She always got this way when she had some juicy tidbit that she wanted to share. It was nearly impossible for her to keep a secret.

“—And then I said, I have as much right to be here as anyone.” She scoffed. “Can you believe that? He actually thought I was a servant! Me! The thought of me cleaning.” She shuddered.

“Maybe he didn’t know.” I shrugged my shoulders, pretending to show interest in her distress.

“Ha! Do I look like a lower Fae? No. Look at these cheekbones.” She gestured toward her face. “Fae have killed to be as pretty as me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Gab, that was one time, and they didn’t die. They only ended up scarred.”

“She might as well have died. I would have committed suicide if I had to go the rest of my life disfigured like that.” Gab made a face at the thought.

“Not everyone cares about appearances.” I offered and then tried to change the subject. “I thought you were going to tell me what he looks like, not his guard.”

“I’m getting there.” She waved me off. “So, I got past the nasty guard and into the prince’s sitting room, and low and behold there he was lounging on the couch like some half-breed. Really now, does he have no decorum? It is no surprise he wouldn’t think twice about letting his guard down where anyone could walk in on him.”

“He was in his private rooms, though. No one should have been able to walk in on him,” I pointed out, not really believing much of what she said. Erydesa had a way of adding on to her stories to make them seem more than they were.

“But I did, so anyone else could have as well. I’m just saying, he should be a little more mindful of where he is, even if he is a guest. He is still UnSeelie. He could have—” Gab stopped mid-sentence catching sight of something in the garden. “Oh pooh, I was just getting to the good part.”

I followed her gaze to land on a dark-haired Fae sitting on a bench with a book in his hand. With his attention focused on his book, my eyes trailed down his exquisite form. All thoughts of not caring about looks were smothered by a sudden undeniable need. When he glanced up from his book, my breath caught in my throat.

Eyes the color of the glittering night sky locked onto mine. The fierceness in his gaze froze me in place. There was anger there, but also a hollowed emptiness. I knew at that moment I’d go through with the engagement. Not because I craved freedom or because he made my insides

melt, but to make sure those beautiful eyes never gazed at me with such loneliness again.



Chapter 6

Dorian

AS FAR AS GARDENS went, the Seelie garden was above average. Nothing compared to the virtual Garden of Eden my mother had at home, but it was nice nonetheless.

Finding my way there had been a challenge though. It was like I was a pariah. No one wanted anything to do with an UnSeelie, even a royal one. I hadn't felt so unwelcome since I'd walked in on a faerie mating ritual. I shuddered at the memory. Now that was something I never wanted to see again.

When I had finally found it I'd been about to get one of the servants to direct me to the garden, as I'd already been wandering the palace for a good while.

I found the first bench I could and splayed out on it for a bit. I had just started reading my book when the sound of voices filled the area. As they got closer, there was one that I recognized.

The female from earlier.

My brows furrowed and my face hardened. I didn't take kindly to being laughed at and even more so that she was now talking to her companion like I was a piece of garbage she had stepped on. UnSeelie or not, I was still the crown prince; she needed to show the correct respect to her superiors.

I was all set to put her in her place when they rounded the corner, and I froze. While she had pale hair like the other woman, her blue eyes held an icy stare. This was without a doubt the Seelie Princess. She resonated royalty and was the spitting image of her mother. I realized then why the woman had been laughing at me so much.

This princess was no pushover.

"Why hello again." The woman from before smiled as they approached, there was a hint of amusement in her eyes that irritated me to no end.

"Hello." I snapped my book shut and stood to my feet. "I don't believe I got your name before."

“Ah,” the blonde seemed to flush before clearing her throat and placing a hand on her chest, “I am Gab.”

I couldn’t help the smile that spread across my face. Her name was absolutely ridiculous. Of course, it was probably not her real name. The new rule about keeping your birth name secret had spread across the realms, not that everyone had actually followed them. I was bad about it myself.

Clearing my throat, I gave a slight bow. “It is a pleasure to meet your acquaintance, Gab.” Straightening back up, I turned my gaze to the other blonde still clutching her companion’s arm. “And you must be my beautiful betrothed. I have heard so many glorious tales about you that I feel as if I know you already.”

I held my hand out to her, waiting for her to place her hand in mine. After a moment or so, it was obvious that she would not be allowing me to kiss her hand as was customary. In fact, she was gazing at me in such an odd manner I feared she might be dumb. Was it possible that everyone loved her so much because of some disability?

No. There was no way the Seelie Queen would allow herself to have a disabled child. A Fae so set on perfection, the very thought of it probably horrified her.

Thankfully, Gab seemed to think that she was behaving oddly as well. The blonde tried to discretely nudge her princess causing her to jolt out of whatever daze she was in.

“Oh, uh, sorry,” the princess stumbled over her words, her face coloring a delightful pink. I fought against the need to grin at her. If it was this easy to get her to blush, I couldn’t wait to see how she would react when I started to woo her. The thought made parts of me harden. My arousal was not unnoticed by the two Fae women. The princess’s face heated even more, but Gab had a smug sort of smile on her face.

Sometimes I wished our senses weren’t so advanced. It was impossible to get away with anything without our scent changing. I’d have to remember in the future to refrain from thinking naughty thoughts that might give me away.

“And obviously, I am delighted to meet you as well.” Pretending not to have given away my position was pointless, so I might as well use it to my advantage. The princess must have a better hold on her hormones, or maybe I just didn’t affect her the same way she affected me.

Nah.

Gab giggled and even when her princess gave her a sharp look she kept laughing. “Are all UnSeelie as overeager as you?”

The accusation was so offensive I didn’t know how to respond. Of course, we weren’t. I was just losing my mind.

“Not that I am aware of. So, can you speak or am I to assume you just don’t want to speak to me?” I tried to turn the subject away from my arousal and back to my mute betrothed.

A slight smile spread across her mouth and my eyes were instantly drawn to her full lips that just begged to be nibbled on and would look fantastic wrapped around a certain appendage.

“I don’t know about her but I find your conversation invigorating.” Gab’s laughter filled her voice, but I ignored her, my eyes solely on my betrothed.

Her pale eyes flickered down and then back up as she chewed on her bottom lip and then she spoke, “Believe me, the pleasure is mine.”

The words were so quiet that I almost didn’t hear them but the voice was clear. Like bells, it tinkled a rhythmic sound that caused my body to tighten even harder. This made Gab laugh even more.

Damn. What was wrong with me? I don’t remember ever being this out of control of my body even when I was an adolescent. Maybe it was the innocent way she blushed at my gaze or the slight quirk of her lips at her friend’s laughter but I had a bad feeling this was going to be harder for me than I thought.



Chapter 7

Lynne

“THE PLEASURE IS ALL mine? Really?” I smacked my hand against my face while Erydesa laughed at me from my bed. Glaring, I pointed a finger at her. “And you weren’t any help at all.”

Swallowing her laugh, Erydesa held her hands out to each side. “What? It’s not like I knew you’d freeze up worse than a troll on mating day.”

I rolled my eyes as she burst out laughing again while tossing around on my bed.

“I did not freeze up.”

“Did too! You said not one intelligent word the entire time we were with his royal deliciousness.” Erydesa’s eyes glazed over and she licked her lips. I didn’t need to smell the air to know she was attracted to my betrothed. Not that I blamed her. He was quite something to look at.

It wasn’t like I hadn’t seen my fair share of attractive men. The Seelie Court was littered with them. My mother wouldn’t have it any other way. Beauty was everything to the Seelie Queen. Even the Lower Fae she used as servants had to be a certain level of attractiveness. I didn’t know when she became so shallow or power hungry. I felt like she’d always been that way. Though, my father would argue that.

“I don’t know what happened,” I mumbled staring out the window. The sky was beginning to darken, which meant my first dinner with my betrothed was quickly approaching. Thankfully, I wouldn’t be alone, but it was a mixed blessing. My parents would be there and that came with a whole other set of problems.

“Well, you better get a hold of yourself quick,” Erydesa said sliding off my bed and approaching me. “I’ve heard about this guy, and he’s a smooth talker. He’ll have you on your back before you even realize you are being seduced. Though,” her eyes twinkled with a wicked gleam, “with how he reacted to your presence alone, I don’t think you will have a problem guessing what’s on his mind.”

We both giggled.

No, I definitely wouldn't have a problem telling what my Fae prince was thinking. I had only heard rumors about the UnSeelie, but it seemed like the talk was true. The UnSeelie didn't control their emotions the same way the Seelie did. Which put me at an advantage in a major way.

"So," Erydesa started, "what are you going to wear to this dinner?" she brushed past me and opened my wardrobe where she thumbed through my clothing and frowned. "Don't you have anything more... just more?"

"Unlike you," I pushed in beside her and grabbed one of my better dresses to drape over my arm, "I don't spend all my time in the company of the opposite sex. So forgive me if my wardrobe is lacking a certain provocative luster."

Erydesa eyed the pale colored garment in my hand with a disappointed look. "Come, now, your betrothed has given you the perfect weapon against him and you aren't going to take advantage of it?" She pulled the dress out of my hands and held it up. "At least wear something with a bit of cleavage. This just screams virgin."

Jerking the dress from her hands, I snapped, "I am a virgin."

She shrugged. "So, doesn't mean you need to look it."

"He didn't have a problem with what I was wearing before, so why change?"

"To drive him wild of course."

I shook my head at her, not even bothering to argue. We would always have differing opinions on how we should portray ourselves, and there was no use wasting my breath on it. My everyday clothing had easily aroused the prince; purposely showing more skin would be showing my hand. I'd rather keep my moves subtle. So I could keep him on his toes until I had him right where I wanted him. One thing I knew for sure about this arrangement, I would be the one with the power, no one else. I was done being pushed around.



METAL CLINKING AGAINST PLATES was the only sound to accompany the awkward silence that filled the dining hall.

Normally I dined alone in the library or with the servants. My parents were usually too busy entertaining to eat a meal with me. I couldn't even

remember the last time we sat down together to eat, so sitting with them now made the situation even tenser than it should have been.

I felt bad for the UnSeelie Prince. He wasn't used to the intensity of my parents. My eyes watched as he shifted in his seat, his eyes darting around him like he was waiting for someone to jump out at him and attack at any moment. It took all my effort not to smirk at his discomfort.

"So," my mother finally broke the silence. Her sharp gaze locked onto the prince not missing a detail. "What do you go by?"

"Excuse me?" the dark haired prince's brow rose and genuine confusion filled his face.

"Well, we can't very well call you your highness now can we?" My mother glanced at my father and me and gave a dirty chuckle. "You must have some kind of name to which we can refer to you by?"

My betrothed's face actually reddened at my mother's question. "No, I suppose not." His eyes met mine, and I gave him a reassuring smile but quickly dropped it.

You're supposed to be making this harder for him not easier, I chastised myself. I couldn't seem to help myself when it came to this man. There was something about him that just made me want to save him. Whether from my mother or from himself I wasn't sure.

"Most of my citizen's call me the dark prince. I suppose you can call me that as well." As soon as he said his name, I had to hold back my laugh. I didn't do a good enough job though because a strangled noise came out causing the dark prince's eyes to snap to me. I covered up my slip up by taking a drink from my glass.

"And what about my bride to be?"

His words caught me off guard causing my drink to go down the wrong pipe. Coughing, my eyes watered as I croaked, "What?"

"What do you wish me to call you?" His dark sapphire eyes glittered with laughter. "Or would you prefer just wife?"

Before I could answer my mother burst out laughing. "I had forgotten how amusing your kind are. I will have to remember to invite more of you to my gatherings. Don't you think, dear?" She clasped hands with my father who had a tinge of a smile on his face as well, but the strain around his eyes told me he wasn't as happy to be here either.

"Whatever you say, my love." He gave my mother a tight smile, but his eyes never wavered from the UnSeelie Prince.

For all my father's convincing to get me to agree to this marriage, now that it was actually happening and right in front of him, he didn't seem too thrilled about it. Or trusting of my betrothed. Was it just fatherly concern or something more?

Unfortunately, I was unable to answer that question yet because everyone's gaze turned to me, waiting for me to answer the question. "I... I don't know." I frowned hard. I'd never had to think about a nickname. As the princess, everyone just called me your highness anyways or my parents called me daughter. Unlike Erydesa, I didn't have an outstanding trait like talking too much or body jewelry like Bastian. It was in that moment that I realized how utterly boring I was.

"Then shall we name you now?" my betrothed suggested causing all of our eyes to turn to him.

"I think that's a splendid idea." My mother clapped her hands together with a gleeful smile. "Since you are soon to be taking my daughter as your own, I think it is only fitting you do the honor. Don't you think, daughter?"

My jaw clenched at being referred to as if I were a piece of property. I smiled tightly. "Of course, mother."

The dark prince didn't say anything for a moment. His eyes roamed over me taking in every inch. I felt a slight twinge in parts I had never felt before at the intensity of his gaze. It caused the dark prince's nostrils to flare and his eyes to turn stormy. Shifting in my seat, I didn't dare meet my parent's eyes. They no doubt could tell that my scent had changed, and that was too horrifying to even contemplate.

Finally, when I felt as if I could no longer bare his stare, he spoke, "Peach." The single word caused a liquefying effect on my insides. Not the word itself but the way he said it. Dark, forbidden. As if he were talking about more than just a name. It caressed my flesh and coaxed my magic, asking me to let it in. And Reaper help me I really wanted to.



Chapter 8

Dorian

SITTING IN MY GUEST room, I ran over the events of the evening. I didn't know why I chose that name for my future wife. She wasn't a piece of fruit. But all I could think of was her creamy skin and the way she smelled. Sweet and juicy, I couldn't wait to take a bite out of my blushing bride. Waiting to take her until she was ready would be torture but well worth the wait.

I had no doubt in my mind that my future bride was untouched. She blushed far too easily.

Then there was her reaction to the name I gave her. I didn't mean to put so much magic into the name. It had just happened. The effect it had on her though was worth it.

If I thought she smelled fantastic before, the way she smelt after my magic touched her made a primal force ignite inside me. Never with any of my prior lovers had I been so taken by another. It had taken all I had not to jump across the table and take her right there in front of her parents.

I snorted. Knowing how the Seelie were about sex, I wondered if they would have even cared. Their parties were known to get quite physical. The guests becoming so drunk on faerie wine that it was not unheard of for an orgy or two to sprout up in the midst of the ballroom.

Thinking of those kinds of parties made me frown. How was my peach so untouched with the world she lived in? The fact that she had not taken a lover or two over her lifetime was suspicious.

Not that I was complaining. I didn't want to have to compete with any past or current lovers. Not to forget the thought of being her first and only lover made the alpha in me roar with delight.

I adjusted the painful tightness that had been constantly plaguing me since the moment I saw my peach. If I didn't get some relief, I would have a full night of tossing and turning. The morning could not come faster. I wanted to see her again, but this time without her parents or annoying friend by her side.

If only I could get her alone, then I could put her fears at ease. I was sure she had many. Fae weren't very trusting. And asking a Seelie Fae to trust an UnSeelie was like telling the sun to stop moving across the sky. Thinking of seeing her again caused my magic to jerk. It didn't want to wait either.

And why should I? She was my betrothed. We were practically married anyway. Why shouldn't I visit her now?

Standing from the couch, my feet moved toward the door. Once out in the hallway, I froze. I had no idea where her bedroom was or if she would even be in there.

Placing my hands on my hips, I took a deep breath in trying to find some hint of her sweet scent. I caught a faint whiff. It was old, not something I could really follow. More than likely it was from weeks ago. I doubted she frequented the guest's quarters often.

Since I couldn't rely on my sense of smell, I would have to use my magic to guide me. I twirled my hand in the air and blue light filled my palm. Not too bright to draw attention to me but bright enough that I could keep an eye on it without losing it. I pushed my intentions into the ball of magic, urging it to find the one we both wanted to see. It didn't need much convincing, it was more than happy to seek out our bride to be.

The blue ball shot down the hallway, and I quickly followed after it. It took me through many turns and down a pair of stairs. No one stopped me or even paid any mind to the hovering ball guiding me. The Fae I did see only gave me a brief curious glance before continuing on their way. I guess I wasn't that interesting. Other times, I would be bothered by my anonymity but in this case, it was a blessing.

One more turn and the ball stopped at a large double door room. I stood before it waiting. Was this it? It had to be, my magic was never wrong.

Absorbing the ball of light back into myself, I poised my hand before the door and let it pound against the wood. My ears strained to hear some kind of response, but I couldn't hear anything from inside the room. My brows furrowed, and I leaned slightly toward the door.

"Can I help you?"

Jerking back from the door, my eyes landed on the very person I had been searching for. Wearing a much different outfit than I had seen her in at dinner, she still took my breath away. While the majority of the women

seemed to be partial to wearing gowns that clung to their figures there were a few who wore trousers and tunics. But none of those who I have seen wear such clothing compared to seeing it on my betrothed

The legs of the pants hugged her hips and outlined her shapely legs making my mouth water. Her neck and shoulders were bare in a long-sleeved cream-colored shirt that tied just above her bust. Suddenly, my mind was thinking of all the ways I could get her to let me untie those ties.

“Hello?” her brow raised, and she waved a hand in front of my face. “Are you just going to stare all day?”

Licking my lips, I cleared my throat. Pulling something flowery out of the air, I tried to make up for my stumble. “If the vision was you, then I could gaze upon your beauty until the Reaper takes me.”

Her lips pursed together, and I could see my words did not have the desired effect. If anything, it made her even more suspicious of my showing up on her doorstep.

“What are you doing here?” she crossed her arms over her chest and pushed one hip to the side. The sight didn’t help my desire to touch her.

Sighing, I decided to go for the truth. “I apologize if I startled you. I did not mean to make you uncomfortable.” I ran a hand through my hair and gave her a sheepish look. “I simply thought it might be nice for us to get to know each other without Fae politics getting in the way.”

My peach watched me for a moment and then nodded. Moving toward me she slipped between the door and myself. She swung the door open and gestured inside. “After you, dark prince.”

Her lips quirked as she said the nickname which gave me hope. It was possible this wouldn’t be so bad after all.



Chapter 9

Lynne

SAYING THAT I WAS having a mild panic attack was an understatement. I'd never had a male in my room that wasn't a servant or a relative. Why I had let a complete stranger in without a thought was beyond me.

"So, this is your room," the dark prince drew out as he stepped into my room. His head turned this way and that.

Becoming self-conscious, I searched the room for any clothing or embarrassing items that I needed to hide. Luckily, though, I am a pretty neat person, and the only things lying around were my books.

I made a mental note to take some of them back to the library before I stepped in front of my betrothed. "So what did you want to talk about?" I might as well get the ball rolling before he did something to make me lose control again like at dinner. The thought of it still made my face heat.

His dark eyes turned from looking over my room to meet mine. His lips turned up in a small smile and he shrugged. "Anything. We do not have anyone to worry about now that we are alone. So feel free to be yourself."

Be myself? In front of a complete stranger? That was as likely to happen as a faerie giving birth to a troll.

Clasping my hands together in front of me, I tried to think of something safe to talk about. But my mind was blank. I honestly had no idea what to talk about with this person.

"How about this, let us have a seat and each take a turn asking a question?" he asked sitting on the couch in the middle of the room. He patted the seat next to him, clearly wanting me to join him, but I hesitated.

Closer was probably not a good idea when it came to the UnSeelie Prince that already made faeries dance in my stomach.

He leveled his gaze at me and smirked. "Come, now, I won't bite. I'll be a perfect gentleman."

I chewed on my lip glancing at where he sat and then looked away before sighing. At least it wasn't on the bed.

I eased down next to him, my hands in my lap. The dark prince shifted in his seat and I tensed for an attack. When all he did was cross one leg over

the other, guilt ate at me.

Come on, Lynne, pull it together. You can't just jump to conclusions like that. You aren't your mother.

"So," the dark prince started, placing an arm on the back of the couch. My body was acutely aware of how close his hand was to my shoulder.

"So," I replied feeling a bit foolish.

"What do you like to do for fun?"

I couldn't help but laugh a bit at his question. When he gave me a curious look, I gestured around us. "You can't tell?"

The dark prince's eyes landed on the pile of books I had next to us, and he smiled sheepishly. "I suppose that one was pretty obvious."

"You think so?" I teased.

"All right then." He turned slightly in his seat to face me. "Since I wasted mine, it is your turn."

"All right," I paused, my eyes staring off into the distance and then I had my question. My pale blue eyes locked with his. "Do you really want to marry me?"

His eyes widened a fraction. I seemed to have stunned him. Maybe I shouldn't have asked? No. I needed to know. If I was going to make the effort, then he would too. I refused to be miserable for the rest of my existence.

After what felt like forever, he finally answered, "You do not waste any time, do you?"

I shrugged a shoulder. "Best to get the hard ones out of the way. So, do you?"

"I am going to be honest with you, my peach." His nickname for me caused my skin to prickle. I forced the feeling back to listen. "When I first learned of our engagement I did not react well."

I could relate to that. Seven plants died at my hands because I was so furious and couldn't control my magic. It had taken weeks before I could finally get it together well enough to coax a sprout from the ground.

"And now?" I asked partly holding my breath for his answer.

"Once I realized it was for the good of our realms, I could not exactly say no." He offered me a small smile.

"I get that."

"Once I was set on it, I could only hope that you were not some spoiled brat that I couldn't stand. Thankfully, that was no so."

My lips quirked up at that. “You didn’t care if I was ugly? Or deformed? What if I had horrible breath? Or my laugh was annoying?”

He laughed at my questions, the sound of it made me shiver. Was there nothing about this man that didn’t affect me? If I reacted this way just to his laugh, I couldn’t imagine how I would react to his touch.

“It did cross my mind, but then I thought, the Seelie Queen would not dare to have an ugly child. So I should be safe, and thankfully, I was right.” His eyes glittered as he watched me. “My turn.”

“All right,” I answered, though, he hadn’t exactly answered my question at all.

The dark prince leaned forward his eyes darkening as he said, “Have you ever laid with another?”

The question stunned me. I had expected all sorts of questions. I hadn’t expected him to ask something so personal. Though, I should have. We are to be married, eventually. He should know whether I have been with another. Though, based on what Erydesa had said about his reputation, I had no doubt that he had been with plenty of women.

“No.” The single word seemed to resound through the room making him suck in a hard breath.

“Have you ever even been kissed?” he asked getting closer to me.

“That’s two questions,” I whispered, my eyes flickering to his lips and then back up to his eyes where they had turned into the turbulent stormy blue.

“I do not think that you have.” His hand came up to brush the side of my face, his voice lowering as well.

My body burned where his hand was touching me, and the room suddenly was stifling. I leaned into his touch without meaning to; my eyes fluttering opened and closed.

The dark prince’s thumb slid along my bottom lip, and my tongue darted out, tasting him. It was then that my nose was assaulted with the combination of our scent. It had kind of earthy spice to it. Something I had never experienced before.

But having experienced it now, my body roared in response. My body alighted with desire and a low growl came from my betrothed, causing my eyes to shoot open.

His nostrils flared, his eyes even darker than before. It was as if he were a feral creature and not the Crown Prince of the UnSeelie Court. The

intensity of his gaze frightened me enough that I tried to pull away, but his other arm wrapped around me drawing me closer to him until our fronts touched.

“I wish to kiss you.”

The words were more of a statement than a question. I wasn't sure how to react. I wanted to kiss him too, but part of me kept telling me not to. That he would ruin me if I gave into him. I shoved that part back and swallowed thickly before nodding.

That was all the consent he needed before his mouth covered mine. He didn't take his time coaxing me into submission. Instead, he dove in overtaking my senses until all I knew was him.

Each sweep of his touch ignited a fire in me that left me craving more. My hands grasped his shirt, hoping for something to ground myself, but all it did was spur him on more. I was hopelessly lost in him and I couldn't have been happier.



Chapter 10

Dorian

EXCITEMENT STIRRED IN MY belly as I walked my mother's garden. Today was the day. My peach would finally come to my home and meet my mother.

I had been exiled to the Seelie Court for over a month, and while I had made progress with my betrothed, she had yet to let me kiss her again. Just thinking about it made my blood stir with desire, and I longed to have her by my side.

I hoped that being in the UnSeelie Court helped her relax a bit. Just like her mother, she was wound so tightly that I worried she would burst from all the words she didn't say and the feelings she barely suppresses behind her pale eyes.

It pains me to think of her cooped up in her palace. She is like a wildflower that should be free to spread her roots among the masses, not kept down in the dark.

I chuckled to myself. Who would have thought I, a notorious womanizer, would be spouting poetry like some lovesick fool?

But was I a fool? My peach had so easily claimed my heart, I didn't even know it was happening until I had caught myself smiling just watching her care for her plants. Or even when I would catch her in the library. So engulfed by her reading that no one else in the world mattered. Even the way her face scrunched down in concentration made me hard. Reaper help me, but I was hopeless.

"I hope you are not worrying yourself too much?" my mother's voice jerked me from my thoughts and I turned to greet her.

I wrapped my arms around her small frame, pressing my lips to her cheek. "Oh, you know me." I gave a small smile before releasing her.

"Yes, I do. Is this child really all you claim to be?" Her eyes narrowed into a warning look that I knew too well. I hadn't been a very well behaved child.

"Do not worry, mother." I placed a hand on her cheek and hoped my expression was reassuring. "You will love her as much as I do. And she is

hardly a child. She is almost as old as me.”

“You are not more than a toddler yourself.” My mother sniffed before turning her gaze to her garden.

The pride and joy of the UnSeelie Court was my mother’s flower wonderland. Rows of flowers of all shapes and colors lined the courtyard. A large fountain sat in the middle of a large tree with a man and two women. I had asked about the fountain before but my mother had just smiled that secret smile of hers without ever giving me a real answer. My eyes moved from the fountain to a bush near us.

“They haven’t budded yet,” my mother mused, “they probably won’t be ready until you are wed.”

“That’s all right,” I replied walking over to the bush, “It can be a wedding gift then.”

As soon as I got home from the Seelie Court, I had asked my mother to help me plant a rose bush. White roses for my bride to be. I wanted her to feel welcome in what would soon be our home, and I thought that if she had a plant that was just her own it would help her transition without feeling like an intruder.

“Not that I’m complaining,” my mother started making me roll my eyes, “But why is it that she is moving here and not the other way around?”

I actually didn’t know the answer to that one. When I had asked my peach about it, she had pursed her lips and said, “That is how my mother wants it.”

It made me dislike the Seelie Queen even more. If she cared so little for her daughter’s wellbeing, I could only imagine how much she cared for her own people.

Before I could come up with an answer for my mother, a crash sounded in the distance followed by a high-pitched scream. A horde of opalaughts came charging through the garden.

Mother and I jumped to the side so as not to get run over by the small rabbit-like creatures, matching frowns marred our faces. One opalaught brought up the rear of the group. It was smaller than the rest with ears so long they trailed behind it. When it came upon us, its eyes widened. So interested in my mother and I that it tripped over one of its ears, causing it to fall face first onto the ground.

Reaching down, I scooped the creature up in my arms. It wasn’t very heavy, not much more than a few pounds, but its fur was the softest thing I

had ever felt. Its body shook in my hands, obviously terrified.

“Do not worry, little one,” I murmured rubbing a finger between its ears. “I will not hurt you.”

It stared up at me for a few more moments before seeming to decide I was safe enough. It pushed its face into my hand trying to get me to pet it more.

Once I was sure I had its trust, I asked, “Can you tell me, little one, what has caused you to run?”

“Trip runs because of the mean girl, Trip does,” his tiny voice explained, his beady eyes looking toward where he had come from.

“What mean girl?” my mother asked stepping closer to me.

The creature called Trip glanced to my mother, his mouth spreading out to smile. Everyone seemed to love my mother and why wouldn’t they? She was far better than the other option.

“The human,” Trip whispered as if it was a big secret.

My mother made a disgusted noise in the back of her throat. “I told you that child was going to be nothing but a pain. I better go see what she has done now.”

She pushed by me toward where the opalaughts had fled from, her skirts brushing angrily against the stone path. I patted the creature on the head and sat him on the ground.

“Off you go. Let us take care of this.”

Trip’s little cotton tail wiggled behind him. “Of course, of course! Trip will leave it to your Highnesses, he will!”

What a peculiar little creature. I shook my head as it scampered off. I then turned on my heel to follow after my mother who had disappeared behind one of the many large green hedges.

“You must be more careful,” my mother’s voice rang out as I came into range.

“But I can’t help it. They’re so cute!” a bell-like voice replied.

Coming around the next corner, my eyes landed on the human girl the opalaughts had been so frightened of. She was a tiny thing dressed in a robin egg blue tea dress. She wore little white gloves on her hands and stockings on her legs. Her curly blonde hair bounced around her as she enthusiastically spoke to my mother.

“Hello, I do not believe we have met.” I approached them with caution in my step. The child lifted her head. When her eyes landed on me they

widened a fraction and then she was up on her feet and barreling into me.

Startled by the sudden contact, I placed a hand on top of the curly head to keep us both from going down. Her large eyes peered up at me with an innocent grin.

“I am the UnSeelie Prince, and who might you be?”

If possible, her grin expanded even further across her face as she clung to me tighter. “I’m Alice. Alice Liddell.”



Chapter 11

Lynne

SEVEN MONTHS. IT HAD been seven months since I had met and fell helplessly in love with my dark prince. My lips slid up into a smile at the thought of the UnSeelie Prince being mine. Giggling, I skipped down the path and out into my soon to be mother-in-law's garden.

After our initial meeting, it had been decided by both parties that it would be best if I spent some time in the UnSeelie Court as well. I, of course, had been delighted to finally get out from under my mother's thumb. But the UnSeelie Court was nothing like the palace back home.

For one, the air seemed sweeter. I didn't know why but each breath I took left a sweet taste on my tongue. It was peculiar for sure but not the only difference.

The moment I had crossed from the Seelie Court to the UnSeelie it was as if a weight had lifted off of me. I was suddenly not worried about how I acted or who saw me. I could smile and laugh without worrying what Fae might be plotting against me.

For once in my life, I felt truly free. I just hoped it would last.

"Wow," I murmured to myself as my eyes took in the surrounding garden. I thought mine was something to behold, but this place was like a wonderland of flowers. There were some here that I didn't even know existed.

My slippers padded against the cobblestone as I made my way around the enclosed area. The heavy scent of the foliage filled my lungs to the brim. There was no place I'd rather be than surrounded by greenery. Well, maybe my library, but the queen's garden was a close second.

"Do you like it?"

I jumped in place at the voice. I spun on my heel to meet the gaze of the most beautiful Fae I had ever seen. Everyone said my mother was beautiful, and that I was the spitting image of her. Not that I would take that as a compliment most days, but the woman before me now redefined everything I knew about beauty.

Her black hair was so dark blue streaks glinted in the light. It fell over her shoulders and blended into her matching dress causing a waterfall of silk. My hand itched to touch it. Was it as smooth as it looked? I forced my hand to stay put. This was my soon to be mother-in-law it wouldn't do to act out of place at the beginning.

My dark prince's eyes were the same as his mother's. Though his made my stomach twist in delightful knots, hers were full of mirth and a slight darkness that warned me to tread carefully. This was not a woman to trifle with.

"It's lovely," I finally answered back, my eyes turning from her to gaze around the garden once more. "I didn't know you had an affinity for the earth."

"Among other things." The queen gave a slight chuckle and moved toward me, her long form-fitting dress sliding around the stone. While most would have looked out of place in such grand attire she seemed to fit the scene perfectly. And of course, she would it was her garden.

She stopped beside me and my body tensed. I was used to my mother. I'd only met the UnSeelie Queen once before and I'd been a baby at that time. Now I didn't know how to act or speak. Did I call her your highness? Or Queen? This whole no name nonsense made things increasingly more complicated than it needed to be.

"I was looking for my betrothed," I explained, not wanting her to think I was snooping around. "Have you seen him?"

"He's in the orchard," she replied and then to my surprise she looped her arm through mine and began to lead me down the path.

"Where are we going?" I let her guide me toward an opening in the large green hedges surrounding the garden.

"You want to find my son, do you not?"

"Yes, but I just assumed you'd tell me how to get there." I took in every twist and turn we took in case I had to get back on my own.

She gave my arm a slight squeeze and smiled at me. "What kind of mother-in-law would I be to let you wander alone in a strange place? Besides..." her voice dropped an octave. "The UnSeelie Court is much more dangerous than it seems. I would not care to see you hurt from negligence."

I nodded not knowing what to say to her warning. So far the UnSeelie Court was much nicer than my own. Though, I hadn't been outside the palace walls, so my opinion was pretty much null and void.

We turned a few more times before we exited the hedge maze and stepped into a large field full of rows and rows of trees. My mouth dropped open at the sight. I'd never seen anything like it. The more I was in the UnSeelie Court the more at wonder I became.

"My son should be just over that ridge over there." The queen pointed her finger to the right where there was a slight hill and even more trees.

When she let go of my arm to leave I called out, "Wait? You're leaving? I thought you didn't want me wandering alone?"

She paused and gave me a slight smile. "Do not worry, there is nothing here that can harm you. It's one of the few places you do not have to fear but remember," her eyes narrowed, "there is much to fear in this world and your heart. Do not let either catch you off guard."

Chewing on my lip, apprehension filled my chest. Her words were not comforting. If anything, it made me even more anxious for her to stay. But before I could express my concerns she had reentered the hedge maze leaving me utterly alone.

My eyes searched the area expecting something to jump out at me at any moment. Even though she had said I was safe here, I still didn't like being left alone in a strange place.

After a moment or so, I took a deep breath and forced my feet forward. Staying here wasn't going to solve anything. I had come to find my dark prince, and that was exactly what I would do.

It didn't take long to make my way across the orchard and to the hill the queen had pointed out. When I got to the top of the hill, I found myself slightly out of breath and my dress sticking to my skin. It was a lot steeper than it looked.

At the top of the hill was a tree, much larger than the others with giant balls of fruit decorating its branches. My gaze didn't stay on the tree for long because below its branches stood my prince talking to a blonde woman.

Her hand touched his arm and a broad smile spread across her face as she laughed at something he said. Jealousy flared inside me as I approached the two. When I was within a few feet, the blonde's eyes caught sight of me. Whatever she had been saying was cut off causing my prince to turn.

"My peach," his sultry voice greeted me and he moved from the woman to my side. His arms embraced me filling me with warmth, and for

a brief moment I forgot about the unknown woman and just enjoyed his closeness.

“Hello.” I held him tight. “I couldn’t find you at the palace. Your mother brought me here.”

“Of course she would.” He pulled back from the hug and brushed my hair behind my ear. “I am happy you arrived safely. I meant to be there when you arrived but something came up.”

“Something?” My eyes glanced back to the blonde woman that had yet to be introduced.

The dark prince gestured to the woman to come closer and everything inside me screamed for her to stay away. But I held my tongue. I didn’t know this woman or her relationship with my betrothed; I couldn’t hate her just because of my jealousy.

“This is Ms. Liddell. She is visiting from the human world.”

The blonde dipped down in a curtsy, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“It’s a pleasure to meet the one who has captured our dark prince’s heart.”

I didn’t understand the laughter that filled her voice.

“That’s enough out of you.” My prince scowled at her and waved an arm. “The Hatter is no doubt waiting for you.”

Ms. Liddell’s lip puffed out in a pout and she stomped her foot slightly. “Fine, but don’t blame me when you mess it all up.” She flounced away in the direction I’d come from, leaving me completely bewildered.

“What was that all about?”

His hand came to rest on my shoulders and he smiled. “Do not worry your lovely head about her. Humans are even worse than faeries at times. Always putting their nose in where it does not belong. Now,” his arm curled around me drawing me to his side, “let me show you my kingdom.”

As my prince prattled on about the orchard and whatnot something ate at me. I couldn’t put my finger on it exactly. I just knew that something about that woman did not sit right. I didn’t just have the UnSeelie Court to fear but her as well.



Chapter 12

Dorian

I THOUGHT OVER ALL that had happened in the last few months as I waited by my favorite tree in the orchard.

It was like a dream that I never wanted to end. My peach was everything I never knew I wanted and more. Sweet and caring but also with a lightning temper that when turned on me only served to make me want her more.

I had been firmly against the marriage arrangement when my mother had first told me about it. Even as I told myself it was for the good of the kingdom, I expected to end up in a loveless marriage with someone I couldn't stand to be around.

Now, I couldn't imagine being with anyone else.

I had spent the majority of my time with my peach and had been severely lax in my duties. I knew we would have to come out of our own little bubble eventually, but I needed more time with her before I returned to overseeing the UnSeelie Court with my mother.

My eyes glanced up to the sky where it had begun to darken. I turned around searching for my blonde goddess's head but didn't see it. She should be here by now.

Since it wasn't exactly appropriate for us to spend alone time in either one of our bedrooms we had taken to meeting up at my favorite spot. Each night, after dinner, I would wait for her to meet me. Usually, it was just before the last light shone.

But tonight she was late.

Growling in frustration, I started down the hill determined to figure out where she was when her voice called out. I paused mid-step and turned my eyes toward the voice.

My peach came running out of the entrance to the hedge maze, out of breath, and slightly worn for wear. A worried frown marred my face.

"Are you all right?" I asked when she stopped before me. Her hair was mussed and her clothing covered in a thin layer of dirt. Even a mess she was still the most beautiful woman I had ever laid my eyes on.

“I apologize for being late, but I got lost.” She thumbed back toward the entrance. “Your mother wasn’t kidding when she said the maze had a mind of its own. I thought I was turning the right corner but then the next thing I knew I was in this graveyard like place.”

Oh no. I knew where she had ended up and it was no place for someone of stature to be.

“You didn’t happen to run into any small creatures about this big.” I held my fingers up about three inches apart.

“Yes!” She pointed at my hand. “They kept yelling at me in a language I didn’t understand and then they attacked for no reason whatsoever!”

I sighed. “That would be the Veil of the Faeries. A bunch of pains in my side is what they are. They don’t really need a reason to attack. If you come into their territory, you are free game.”

“Then why don’t you get rid of them?”

“They have their purpose as do many of the unpleasant creatures in the UnSeelie Court. Now, let us talk of something else more pleasant. I only get you for a short while before they will miss you.” I wrapped an arm around her shoulder and led her to the tree.

I didn’t want to worry my princess by telling her what the faeries were really used for. No need to make her panic, or with her curious nature make her want to examine them further.

Keepers of the deceased Fae, the faerie were temperamental and territorial. The only Fae they didn’t attack were my mother, myself, and the Reaper. I wasn’t sure he was actually a Fae. I’d only encountered him a few times, and each time was unpleasant at best. As I’d told my princess, each of us had our part, and we played them the best we could.

“So, how was your day?” she asked as we sat down beneath the tree and leaned against the base of the trunk.

“You were with me for most of it,” I smirked at her.

Giggling, she smacked me on the arm. “That’s beside the point.”

“Well,” I pretended to think for a moment, “There was this gorgeous princess that I have been dying to get alone all day. I think I might be in love with her.”

“Oh really?” She quirked a brow at me. “Is she prettier than me?”

“Oh most definitely.” I turned in my seat placing my hand on her hips.

“That’s not very nice.” She laughed and pushed at my chest. “You are supposed to say no one is prettier than me.”

I cupped the side of her face and lowered my face to hers. “No one makes my heart race like you do. No one makes my blood boil with desire like you. There is no one in this world or the next that will have a hold on my heart like you do.”

“Now that’s more like it,” she murmured before I captured her lips with mine.

Sliding my hands into her hair, I moved until I was hovering above her. I didn’t want to move things too fast. Unlike myself, she has not had lovers before and I don’t want to scare her away.

But my peach once more surprised me. She spread her legs beneath me and grabbed my hips, drawing me between them. The press of my center against hers caused me to groan. Encouraged by her movements, I cupped her breast in my palm kneading it gently. Moaning at my touch, she arched her back pressing more of herself into my hand.

As our tongues moved along each other, I pushed the length of her skirt up her legs, loving the smooth expansion of the skin beneath my hand. Moving up her leg, I sought out her warmth but frowned when her hand caught mine.

“Wait.”

I pulled back to see her face clearly. “Am I moving too fast?”

“No, no,” she quickly said, placing her hands on my hips to keep me from moving away. “I want you and I don’t want to wait any longer but first...”

She trailed off chewing her bottom lip. Her eyes searched around us as if she expected someone to be watching. But I knew that no one would dare intrude on us. Not if they knew what was good for them.

“What is it?” I asked. “You can tell me anything, you know that.”

“It’s silly, really.” She gave me a small smile that clenched at my heart.

“If it bothers you, I highly doubt it could ever be silly.” I stroked the side of her face with the back of my hand.

“It’s just...we are about to do something I’ve never done before and I...” she paused and held my gaze for a moment, “I don’t even know your name.”

I couldn’t stop the smile that crept up my face. My silly peach.

“Is this you asking me?”

Her eyes narrowed at my teasing. “Not if you are going to make fun.” She started to pull away from my grasp, but I grabbed her around the waist

and flipped us over so that she was on my lap.

“I do not mean to make fun of you.” I held her close to me. “I find the new rule ridiculous and if it had been any other time, we would have already settled this matter.”

“Then why can’t we settle it now? No one is around to listen in on us. It would just be between us two.”

I stroked my thumb along her pouting bottom lip. Lovely. She was so breathtakingly beautiful I didn’t understand how I had gotten so lucky. The fates must have decided to bless me with this gift and I wasn’t about to waste it.

“Dorian.”

Her head jerked up at my words and the smile that spread across her face lit her face like a beacon. She leaned in close to me, her lips barely brushing mine and whispered, “My name is Lynne.”



Chapter 13

Lynne

THE UNSEELIE QUEEN HAD been right. Her court was far different from my own. And even more dangerous.

When I first arrived, Dorian had wanted to show me his realm but was very hesitant to show me anything that might scare me away. Everywhere he had taken me was tame.

A flower garden that sang. A nest of opalaughts that were the cutest creatures I had ever laid eyes on. Mainly places that were in the direct vicinity of the palace.

But today was different. Today he was going to take me out of the palace area and into the heart of the UnSeelie Court. My excitement kept me up almost all night and had me up before the first light hit my bedroom.

"You are in a good mood this morning." Dorian smiled at me as we walked through the gardens.

"I'm with the man I love and about to go on an adventure, how could I not be anything other than happy?" My face hurt from how much I was smiling.

"I could think of something that would make you even happier." Dorian's hand slipped into mine and I curled my fingers around his, holding him tight. Ever since the first time we made love, we had not been able to stop touching each other, a caress here, and a stolen moment in the hallway there. I could live forever in his embrace and die a happy princess.

"Oh no you don't," I giggled and bumped shoulders with him, "You aren't going to distract me today. Today we are going out into your realm. I want to see everything. No more trying to shelter me." My lips curved down in a frown. "I got enough of that from my mother."

Dorian stopped and pulled me to him. "I am sorry. I do not mean to coddle you." He stroked the side of my face and I leaned into his touch. "I just know how dangerous my realm can be, and I do not want you to get hurt."

"When we marry I'll have to rule this realm too," I grabbed his hand in mine, "how can I be a good ruler if I don't know the people?"

“Very well,” Dorian sighed and then smiled, “if you insist upon learning about the people then I will take you to see the craziest creatures that I know. That will keep your expectations low for the future.”

Laughing, I let him drag me out of the garden and into the UnSeelie World. This would be an interesting day indeed.



WHEN WE STEPPED OUT of the queen’s garden, I expected to end up back in the graveyard with the nasty faeries, but instead, we were at the edge of a forest.

“Wow, you weren’t joking when you said your world changes a lot.” My eyes took in the surroundings.

The tall walls of the hedge maze were at our backs and to the front of us were dark trees with rolling mist along the ground. I couldn’t see much more than a foot into the dense forest and it gave me an unsettling feeling.

“This is why you should not wander on your own until she is used to you.”

My eyes snapped to Dorian. “She? The UnSeelie Court is a woman?”

Dorian’s lips curved up, his eyes twinkling. “Not in the physical sense of the word. But we refer to her as such because of her temperamental moods. One day she might be kind enough to let you get to where you wish to go and other days she’ll move your house right out from under your nose. Quite irritating actually.” His eyes narrowed at the tree line as if it were the very being he was talking about.

“Hmm, I could see how it would be difficult for someone new to your world.”

“But it is an excellent defense mechanism.” Dorian winked at me before taking my hand. “In any case, we better get going or we will be late for tea.”

“Tea?” I asked as I let Dorian lead me over the forest line and into the dense fog. The sounds coming from the forest were not like anything I had ever heard before. I would have imagined there would be animal noises and maybe leaves brushing against the branches of the trees but each step I took further into its depth the more it felt like I was in a moving breathing being.

“Yes,” Dorian answered unaffected by the world around us. Did he not feel the brush of the wind against him, the way it pulled at you almost

trying to keep you in place? Or maybe it was just me? Was it the UnSeelie Court trying to warn me away?

I sent a silent message to the mercurial being that I meant no harm. It did cause the pull to lessen. It was less aggressive and more curious. I suppose she had decided to watch me until she could figure out if I was friend or foe. I certainly didn't want to be the latter.

"So who are we having tea with?"

"Hatter, naturally." Dorian helped me over a fallen limb so that my gown did not catch on the branches. If I had known we would be traipsing through the forest, I would have chosen to wear breeches instead of a gown.

"Naturally," I replied back, my lips twisting down.

Dorian laughed at my expression and he drew me to him, rubbing his nose against mine. "Do not look so worried, my peach. Hatter is a good friend of mine, you have nothing to fear."

"But your mother said I had everything to fear here," I countered.

My prince's lips turned down in a frown. "That may be true but only in certain company. But since you are with me, you should be well enough." He kissed my knuckles, and we were off again.

Somehow his words did not reassure me, and as we moved further into the forest, my wary feeling got worse. The pulsating sounds I had heard before had dissipated and in its place was laughter. High pitched maniacal laughter.

"What is that?" My footsteps slowed the closer we got to the boisterous sound.

"It is just a bunch of Fae having a good time." He shot me a wicked grin before he upped our pace until we were almost running.

My breathing increased as I tried to keep up with his long strides. I had lived my life caged. My body wasn't ready for such excitement, no matter how much my heart yearned for it.

I kept up with Dorian as best as I could. Embarrassingly, he had to pick me up when I tripped over my own two feet until eventually he finally stopped.

"Are you ready for this?" Dorian asked, his hand poised and ready to push back the brush that separated us from a noisy gathering on the other side.

As the laughter increased to a frightening level, I wasn't so certain I wanted to know what was on the other side. That was until I heard a

familiar voice. One of a Ms. Liddell.
What was she doing here?



Chapter 14

Dorian

I WATCHED LYNNE'S FACE as we stepped out of the dark forest and into the open area that housed Hatter's home. I wanted to give her something exciting but also make her aware of the differences between our worlds.

The Seelie Court was full of structure and rules, but the UnSeelie Court did not have those kinds of restrictions. Passion and fun were on the minds of almost every Fae in the kingdom, and no one knew about those more than Hatter.

When Lynne took in the scene before us her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open slightly. It was adorable, and it caused my body to tighten inappropriately. I had had my betrothed more times than I could count the last few days. One would think I would be tired of her. Alas, the more I had her the more I craved her touch and her wit. I couldn't wait to see how she reacted to Hatter and his friends.

"Come." I took her by the hand and led her into the clearing. A long table covered with a red tablecloth sat in the middle and surrounded by mismatched chairs that suited its guests perfectly.

"Hello, Hatter," I greeted the fae sitting at the head of the table. The silver-haired fae stood from his seat at my voice and welcomed me with a smile.

"Your highness, how good to see you!" his long silver hair cascaded around him as he moved from the table to my side. He held a hand out to me, which I clasped with my own. Then his gray eyes landed on my betrothed. "Now, who is this beautiful creature? This could not be the one that is betrothed to our dark prince. She is too magnanimous."

Lynne laughed at Hatter's obvious flirtations, which I brushed off. Hatter may flirt but he was harmless. He knew where he stood and what I would do should he touch what was mine. And Lynne was most definitely mine.

Even though I trusted my friend, I wrapped an arm around Lynne's waist and hugged her to my side. Giving her a small smile, I said, "My

peach, this is Hatter and these,” I gestured to the creatures sitting around the table, “are his permanent guests.”

“More like infestations,” Hatter muttered but grinned, nonetheless.

“How rude.” A three-foot mouse with a wood door latched to his chest sniffed. “I’m not some rodent.”

“Could have fooled me!” a black creature with large wings and a twinkle in his eyes cackled.

“Oh, knock it off. Can’t you see we have royalty present?” an opalaught with ragged ears and beady eyes snapped.

Ignoring the arguing of his friends, Hatter returned to his seat. “Please, please have a seat we were just sitting down to tea.”

“You are always having tea.” I led Lynne over to the table and pulled out a chair for her. I took the seat next to her on Hatter’s right hand and proceeded to pour my betrothed some tea.

“Too true.” Hatter nodded picking up his own tea. “But with my new lovely guest, it’s hard to not want to celebrate all the time.”

At first, I thought he was talking about Lynne, but Hatter’s eyes went right by her and to the blonde human I had not noticed sitting at the other end of the table.

“Ms. Liddell, I did not know you were back again.” I took a sip of my tea, my eyes watching her carefully. The girl had come to the UnSeelie Court more and more as of late, and I worried we might have a problem. Humans that became obsessed with us usually died tragically, and I didn’t want that to happen with Lynne nearby.

“I hadn’t left.” Ms. Liddell took a sip of her tea, her eyes hazy from the effects. Hatter’s concoction was almost as strong as faerie wine, which meant to us Fae we got little more than a slight high but to humans, the effects were tenfold.

“How much tea have you been giving her, Hatter?” I asked suspicion in my voice.

“Not much at all really.” Hatter shrugged. “I make sure to give her a weak batch if that helps your conscious.”

“Not really.” I shook my head. “You really should not be giving her any at all.”

“Why?” Lynne spoke up from my side. “What harm could it do?”

I placed my hand on top of hers and smiled. “Remember how I said there were dangerous things on this side of the Fae world?” I waited until

she nodded her head before continuing, "Well, Hatter's tea is one of them. Made of the mortuvous mushroom it's potent enough to send a Fae screaming through the dark forest and it's even worse for humans." I glanced sharply at Hatter. "It's not something you drink lightly."

"Then why are we drinking it now?" Lynne stared down into her glass with a deep frown creasing her face.

"Don't you have any sense of adventure?" Ms. Liddell asked in a condescending tone. I shot her a warning glare, which only caused her to smile.

"I have a perfectly fine sense of adventure," Lynne growled, "I just don't fancy being drugged my first trip out of the palace."

This made Ms. Liddell laugh. "My God, let the girl out of your bedroom for more than a few minutes. Thank goodness, you didn't hover around me that much when I first came. I mean, that one time I had decided to skinny dip in the pond by the brownies villa was quite fun, don't you think?"

Hatter cackled along with her, but my eyes were on Lynne. She had begun to frown harder. I could see the wheels turning in her head as she tried to process what Ms. Liddell had said. No doubt Lynne thought something was going on between us, which was what Ms. Liddell had probably meant to happen.

"That is not how it happened and you know it, Ms. Liddell," I snapped, but the damage was already done.

"I think I'm about ready to go back now." Lynne sat her cup down and pushed her seat back. She nodded to Hatter. "Thank you for having me, it's been...informative."

She ran from the table before I could catch her, and I hurried to go after her. The dark forest was no place for the likes of her to be venturing into alone. Especially not after she had drunk some of Hatter's concoction. I was now wishing I had never brought her here in the first place.



Chapter 15

Lynne

I RUSHED AWAY FROM the tea party and into the dark of the forest. Before the forest had made me nervous but now with anger and jealousy in my heart, it only fit my mood.

The nerve of her. Who did she think she was? She was nothing but a puny little human. She should be worshiping at our feet not insulting us.

“Peach!” Dorian’s voice called out to me, but I didn’t slow down.

“Is it true?” I growled when he finally caught up to me. My fists clenched at my sides and I fought back the anger that had manifested itself in me so easily.

“Is what true?” he asked reaching for me but I jerked away. I didn’t want him to touch me right now. If he touched me, I might very well fall apart. Even now I could feel my magic sizzling along the surface of my skin looking for an outlet.

My eyes darted down to the earth. It would be so easy to place my hands on the soil and change this dank forest into my own.

Shaking the temptation off, I glared at Dorian. “That you went skinny dipping with that human. Is it true?”

“What?” his eyes widened. “Of course not! Well, actually,” he paused and rubbed the back of his head with a skittish grin, “it did not exactly happen like that.”

“Then how did it happen?” I crossed my arms over my chest.

Dorian sighed and stepped closer to me but didn’t try to touch me. “Look, you have to understand, Ms. Liddell is an immature brat that does not know how to keep her nose out of things. Which means she needs to be rescued a lot.”

“What does skinny dipping have to do with you rescuing her? Was her clothing attacking her?”

He laughed slightly. “Actually, it was. She had gotten into a patch of brusselbutch, and if you had ever been in contact with that particular bush you would know that it burns like the Reaper when it touches your skin. So,

I had to pull her out of the bush and in the process ended up getting myself covered in it. Thus causing us to have to take all of our clothing off.”

I chewed on my bottom lip at his explanation. I’d never heard of a brusselbutch and wouldn’t know the first thing about if it burned the skin or not but his story made sense. I tried to still the jealousy in me, but it was hard. I’d spent my whole life pretending not to feel things and now that I had the freedom to feel what I liked when I liked it was hard to go back the other way.

“Lynne,” he whispered, his hands wrapped around my upper arms. This time I didn’t pull away from him. I let him draw me closer. “Nothing has or ever will happen between me and that human. You are the only one for me.” He tipped my chin up with his fingers. “My peach, I love you. No one else.”

He brushed his lips against mine and I softened. Throwing my arms around his neck, I let myself get lost in his kiss. Like he said, she was a brat. I should pity her not feel jealous of her.

After a moment, Dorian drew back from the kiss and smiled. “Now, let me show you this beautiful fountain that sits at the heart of the UnSeelie Court. It is so scandalous even your mother would laugh.”

“All right.” I giggled. “Show me this fountain of yours and then take me home and make love to me.”

My words caused Dorian to stop laughing and his eyes darkened. “Actually, on second thought, the fountain is not that great. Let us retire home.”

I smacked his arm with a grin. “No you don’t, you promised me a laugh. Now you must pay up.”

“Very well,” he sighed in defeat and then smirked, “But then we will spend the rest of the evening in my bed.”

“Oh, the horror.” I mock fainted as Dorian clasped my hand in his and led me out of the dark forest.

The UnSeelie Court was ever changing. One second you are standing in a dense forest and the next you are stepping out of the trees and onto a cobblestone road.

“Come, it is this way.” Dorian held onto my hand tightly as he took me through a stone archway and into what looked like a maze.

“You UnSeelie are really into defense, aren’t you?” I commented as we moved through the maze. Each twist and turn looked the same as the

last.

“Like I said, the best offense is a good defense, and we do not lack for defenses.” He paused for a moment and turned to me with a serious expression. “You have to promise me you will not wander on your own. At least not until after we have married. I do not want you to accidentally get swallowed by something.”

I gulped. Swallowed? That didn’t sound good.

“I promise.”

“Good.” He nodded and then started walking again. This time he didn’t stop until we heard the sound of water. “We are almost there.” He tossed me a grin before picking up his pace, almost running down the path.

I laughed and held my skirts to keep up with him until we came to the end of the path. The path exited into a square area surrounded by stone walls. Each corner had a tree in it and then in the center sat a fountain. As we approached the fountain, I began to understand why Dorian had said even my mother would have laughed at it.

The stone fountain had four women in a circle. They were scantily clad and their expressions were that of mid-orgasm. The designer had to be a man. There was no other explanation for it. As my eyes scanned up and down the figures I thought, a very sexually deprived male.

“How can you allow this to be in your kingdom?” I asked, not really upset but more curious. My mother would never have allowed such a thing. Sure the Seelie Fae were all for showing off their bodies at parties but outside of that, it was all about decorum.

“Believe me, we have tried to get rid of it, but every time we destroy it it shows back up in a few days.” He placed a booted foot on the edge of the fountain. “Either it’s the UnSeelie Court messing with us or there are some really fast satyrs around here.”

“Satyrs?”

“Yes, half goat, they are pretty into the whole sex scene. Which is why you should never come here by yourself.” He turned from the fountain and then froze. “Or one of those will show up.” His eyes focused on something behind me.

Standing at seven feet tall was the biggest hairiest creature I had ever seen. He had large horns on his head and his legs were as thick as my whole body. His dark eyes briefly looked at Dorian but bypassed him and focused on me. The curl of his lips made my stomach drop.

Oh no.



Chapter 16

Dorian

SATYRS, WHILE LARGE AND strong, were not the smartest of creatures and were purely focused on mating day in and day out. Any female had to keep their guard up and their legs firmly closed.

“Pretty lady,” the satyr’s deep voice said as his large steps caused the ground to shake around us. As he approached, his hand reached between his legs to grab himself.

Narrowing my eyes, I stepped in front of Lynne. “Stop where you are.”

The satyr didn’t even pay me much mind. One would think that he would recognize his prince and bow immediately at my feet, but the UnSeelie Court was not so organized. I was lucky if half the residents knew who I was, and since I spent the majority of adult life in as many female beds as I could find, I could only blame myself.

“Did you hear me?” I snarled. The satyr paused for a moment before his hand whipped out and slammed into me. My body flew away from Lynne and to the other side of the courtyard.

My head hit the ground hard, and I saw stars. Shaking my head, I scrambled to my feet as Lynne screamed. The satyr had cornered her by one of the trees and was reaching for her. Lynne’s eyes were full of terror, and it made my insides burn.

I rushed across the courtyard and jumped onto the back of the large beast. Grabbing a hold of his horns, I growled, “Do not touch her.”

“Get off, get off.” The creature yelled shaking his head this way and that as he tried to dislodge me. I lost my grip on the fourth shake and fell to the ground with a thud.

Thankfully, I had angered the satyr enough that he moved away from Lynne and came after me. Not so lucky for me though because his hooves were sharp and slammed into my back before I could get away.

Searing pain shot through my back and I stifled a groan. The pain fueled my anger, and I struggled to my feet. If he wouldn’t listen to reason than I had no choice but to use my magic on him.

Usually, I tried to keep my magical use to a minimum. It took a lot of energy and a lot of the times it caused more damage than I intended. This time though, it was either use it or get pulverized. If I was lucky, Lynne would get away unscathed even though I wouldn't.

I drew on the magic inside of me, making my skin come to life. I pulled it into my hands and prepared to attack the beast head on when it cried out in alarm.

My eyes jerked from my hands to the beast. Vines wrapped around its waist. They squeezed tightly causing the satyr to scream.

"Let me go!" he yelled fighting against the vines that only tightened more.

I let go of my magic letting it fall silent and then slowly moved around the large body of the satyr. What was on the other side made my brows rise.

Lynne stood by the tree with her hands on the trunk. Green strings of energy pulsated out of her and into the ground beneath her. More vines shot out of the ground and encased the screaming beast.

As I approached her, I noticed her eyes began to gleam with a bit too much enjoyment. The more the creature screamed, the tighter she coiled her vines around it. She didn't even notice me until I was right in front of her face.

"My peach," I said beside her and then when she didn't answer, I touched her shoulder and shook it, "Lynne, stop. You'll kill him."

"Good," she snapped, "the creature deserves it."

I frowned at her answer. "No. He does not. Satyrs are like this by nature. They can no more resist the need to mate than we can force ourselves not to need to breathe."

My words only made her lips curl down into a frown. "Then there is no use for them in this world. We should just get rid of them all."

"You cannot," I insisted my grip on her shoulder tightening, "we need the satyrs."

"Why?" she snapped.

"If war comes who will be on the front lines if not for them? They might try to take what they like but we still need them to fight our battles for us."

"That doesn't make any sense at all." She shook her head at me. "If they harm others, they should be put to death or banished. No good can come from them existing. My mother would never have let them live."

“But this is not the Seelie Court.” I snapped. “We are UnSeelie, and we do not abide by the rules of your mother. Now, let him go.”

She shot me a look, and for a moment I thought she might kill him anyways, but then the vines loosened and sagged releasing the satyr. The beast fell to the ground his breathing ragged.

“Come.” I took hold of her elbow and led her away from the satyr and out of the courtyard.

We walked for a little while in silence until she finally spoke, “If I am to rule with you, we have to be able to agree when it comes to those situations. If I had had it my way, I’d have killed him without a thought. Nothing that vicious should be allowed to live.”

I sighed. “That is the problem. You only see him as a vicious beast, but he is much more than that. Satyrs create music and even help build homes for our citizens. They cannot help that during mating time they cannot hold back their urges. It is just in their nature.”

“Well, their nature is wrong.”

I stopped and pulled Lynne into my arms. “That is not for us to decide,” I growled and held her tight, “I was trying to make you laugh and here I made you angry.”

Lynne’s tense shoulders softened. “It’s not your fault. I should have listened to you when you tried to tell me that things are more dangerous here than at home. I guess I still have a lot to learn about your world.”

“And I’m sure there is even more to know about yours.” I cupped her face in my hands and pressed my lips to hers. “Come, let us retire. I have some wounds that need attending to, and I know just the nurse to help me with them.”

Lynne giggled as I winked at her before dragging her back toward the palace and away from the nastiness of the UnSeelie world.



Chapter 17

Lynne

TOMORROW WAS MY WEDDING day. I would finally be with Dorian forever and never have to be caged again.

Normally, one would not see the groom the day before the wedding, bad luck and all that, but I couldn't help myself. I wanted to see him. I needed to see him.

When I rose for the day, I quickly dressed and skipped down the stairs of the UnSeelie Palace. The wedding would be held on this side of the Fae Realm as was tradition. My mother would arrive tomorrow for the big day but not a day sooner. Typical.

Others had already begun to arrive though. The palace was busy with life. Servants ran to and fro, each in a hurry to get everything ready for the biggest royal wedding of the millennia. Fae lived for a long time, so it was safe to say the leadership didn't change often. Royal weddings were a rare event indeed.

Everything had to be perfect.

I hurried through the halls trying my best not to get run over by the UnSeelie Fae that filled the halls. Dorian usually was in his study at this time of day. He wasn't one to sleep in. He said he always worked best as the sun rose.

My lips curled up, a memory of the night before filled my head. Dorian had lavished me with his attentions not only once but several times until we both collapsed, and still, he'd woken with the morning light. At least I wouldn't have to worry about my prince being lax in his royal duties. Or his husbandly duties.

I rounded the corner that led to his study and paused at the door. It was closed as usual. I knocked on the wood but didn't wait for him to answer before turning the knob.

Peeking my head in, I frowned. He wasn't here. I pushed the door completely open and stepped into the room.

A large desk took up most of the room. The walls were lined with bookshelves stuffed with so many books I'd had to stop myself from

drooling the first time I saw them. When we weren't getting lost in each other's bodies, I loved to sit and read by his side while he worked. But today I wouldn't get either of those because my prince wasn't to be found.

Not to be deterred, I left his office and searched out his mother, my soon to be mother-in-law.

I had noticed that when the UnSeelie Queen wasn't in her garden, she spent an awful lot of time in her bedroom. I'd come across her bedroom door ajar once. She had been standing in front of a large full-length mirror that took up most of one of her bedroom walls. It had been quite peculiar; she had just been staring at it. The longing in her eyes made me want to ask, but since I wasn't her blood, I thought it best to keep my mouth shut.

But still, it was curious. What was she looking at?

Shaking my head clear of the thought, I knocked on her bedroom door. Her voice called out from the other side and I opened the door.

Sure enough, there she was standing before the mirror once more. For a moment, I thought I saw something in her reflection but the moment she saw me it was gone.

"Good morning," I said walking toward her. "I don't mean to barge in unannounced, but I was wondering if you had seen your son today?"

"You know it's bad luck to see the groom before the wedding," she chastised, but her lips curled up in a knowing grin.

"I know." I glanced down and shuffled my feet. "But I just have this feeling like I have to see him."

"Very well." She moved across the room, her skirts brushing the hard floor with a swishing sound. "He mentioned something about going to his spot this morning."

My eyes lit up at her words. If he was at the tree, we could be alone without interruption. Hopefully, we could get a few more embraces in before the others began to search for us.

"Thank you." I nodded and headed for the door, but her voice called out to me making me stop.

"While I do not abide by many rules, I feel as if you should follow today's. You should not see your prince today." There was a weird tone in her voice that I did not understand as if she knew something bad was going to happen.

"I will take it under advisement." I nodded again before leaving her room.

I really should follow her advice. It was said the UnSeelie Queen had the gift of foresight. Not like the Seer that knew all of the future, but enough of the gift that the feelings she got were pretty profound.

But I really wanted to see Dorian. Bad luck or not, I would take my chances.

The moment I stepped out of the hedge maze and into the orchard rain began to pour. That's odd, I thought frowning up at the sky. The rainy season had all but ended, which meant it was the best time for a wedding. But the liquid splashing against my face was undoubtedly rain. A sinking feeling settled in my stomach.

The UnSeelie Court had warmed up to me after my time here, and I hadn't gotten lost once in the last few weeks. The rain coming down now felt like a warning. Like it didn't want me to keep going.

First Dorian wasn't in his normal place, then the queen told me not to go, and now the realm itself was warning me away. To a sane person that would be a clear enough sign that I should turn back and not risk whatever was waiting for me. But all the signs just made me need to know what was so bad that I shouldn't see my one true love?

With a determination I didn't know I had, I hurried through the orchard. My hair plastered to my face and my skirts became wet against my legs. I forced my feet to take one step after the other as I made my way up the hill and to our normal meeting place.

When I reached the top, my heart plummeted. Before my head could finish processing what I was seeing, my feet were turning back the way I had come. I shouldn't have come.

My feet pounded through the wet grass, hitting puddles of mud that soaked my dress further, but I didn't care. All I could focus on was what I had just seen.

Dorian had been at the top of the hill, looking as dashing as ever, but instead of brooding like he usually did when he came there alone; he had his arms wrapped around Ms. Liddell. His hands were in her blonde curls, and he held her close to him as he ravished her mouth. Just thinking about it made me sick to my stomach.

I didn't know where I was going but I knew I couldn't go back to the palace. They would all be there getting ready for the wedding tomorrow. I cried out as a sharp pain sliced through my heart. I couldn't breathe.

I'd made it to the other side of the orchard. I leaned against the large rock wall that went around the whole area and tried to catch my breath.

A voice called out to me over the sound of the rain falling. I glanced up to see Dorian running down the hill with Ms. Liddell close behind him.

Shaking my head, I pushed off the wall. I couldn't see him. It was too soon. Too fast. I needed somewhere to think.

Then as if reading my thoughts, a bundle of bushes next to me shook and then moved aside to reveal a hole. Not thinking twice about it, I hurried into the hole bypassing a worn out sign as I trudged further into the opening.

The further in I went the larger the hole became until I was able to walk standing upright. When I exited the hole, I was in a stone covered dome. Standing in the middle of the area was a single tree. It was large and glowing with brightly colored fruit, it was as if it had been waiting for me.

My feet kept going toward the tree, never stopping to wonder what they were doing. When I stopped before the tree I heard a voice in my head. It was deep and warm. The sound of it resonated through me pushing away the chill of the rain.

"What do you wish?" It asked.

Wish? My brow crinkled, not sure if it was some kind of trick or not.

"Your heart aches."

"Yes," I said aloud even though the words had been in my head.

"Do you want it to stop?"

I swallowed thickly and thought back to what I had just seen. Dorian had told me nothing was going on between him and the human woman, but he had lied. Even after all the signs had pointed to it I had believed him because I loved him. But clearly, he did not love me.

If I wished I could turn back time. Then I would never fall in love with the dark prince. I wouldn't know what it felt like to have my heart ripped from my chest.

Decision made, I stepped closer to the tree and answered, "Yes."

"Then take our fruit and you shall get your wish."

My eyes looked to the fruit above me. They were about the size of a peach but with a glow that came from deep inside. The thought of peaches made the fist around my heart clench once more.

Not being able to stand it any longer, I grabbed the nearest fruit from the tree and held it in my hand. Warm to the touch it tingled throughout my

palm. I slowly brought it up to my mouth and then with my wish in mind, I took a bite.

The juices filled my mouth instantly and then my world was spinning. Everything I had ever known or felt rewound. It was like I was a spectator to my own life, except it was in reverse. I saw Dorian and Ms. Liddell embracing and then yesterday when I had been with Dorian myself. He looked at me with such love, and I wanted to stay in that moment forever, but the fruits magic pushed forward faster and faster until I couldn't make out the scenes in front of me.

Until finally, there was nothing.



Chapter 18

Dorian

THE MORNING BEFORE MY wedding I had gone to my office like always to get some work done before the day began. When I arrived there was a note on my desk from Lynne asking me to meet her at our usual spot.

I almost didn't go. It was bad luck to see the bride before the wedding and Fae were anything if not superstitious. I wished I had listened to that warning in my head but being the lovesick fool I was I hurried out of my office and headed to the orchard.

At just after dawn, the orchard was quiet, no workers or anyone else in sight. I thought nothing of it and made the usual trek up the hill to my tree. When I arrived I was happy to find Lynne already waiting for me.

She was dressed in a pale blue dress that clung to her curves. She took my breath away. I couldn't get enough of her. Soon she'd be my bride and then we wouldn't have to worry about sneaking around to be together.

"Hello, my prince." She smiled at me from beneath her lashes. She had a shyness to her that was unusual for our relationship. I'd had her every way I could have her, how could she still be shy around me?

Shaking off her strange behavior, I took her in my arms. "Hello, my peach," I purred sliding my hands down her back and cupping her backside.

She made a small squeaking noise but didn't pull away. I gave her a confused look. "What's wrong? You act like I've never touched you before."

"Nothing, nothing. Just wasn't expecting such a warm welcome is all." She gave me a shaky smile that made me frown harder.

"Well, we are getting married tomorrow, I would hope that all of my welcomes are like this." I stroked my thumb across her face searching for the difference that I just couldn't put my finger on.

"I'm sure they will be." Lynne ducked her head down, a blush coloring her cheeks.

"You are not having doubts now, are you?" I pulled back slightly, concern on my face. I thought we were doing great. Wonderful even. "If

there is something I have done please tell me and I will remedy it right now.”

“No, no.” She shook her head and then chewed her bottom lip like I had seen her do a million times. The nervous habit was so familiar that it calmed some of my fears.

“Then what is it?”

She gave me a soft smile. “I just wanted to see you is all. I missed you.”

Rain began to fall between the leaves of the tree sprinkling us with water. I frowned up at the sky. It shouldn’t be raining today.

Pushing away the thought, I turned my attention back to Lynne and cupped her face with my hand. “I have missed you as well.” Intent on stilling whatever it was that was bothering her, I swooped down and claimed her lips with my own.

Right away I knew something was off. The lips I kissed were Lynne’s. They felt like Lynne’s and even the body was Lynne’s, but the taste. It was all off.

A gasp from behind me had me ripping my mouth away from Lynne’s. The sight before me made my heart stop and my blood run cold.

The unmistakable form of Lynne ran from me and down the hill. I turned from the other Lynne to the one standing before me determined to find out what was going on. But I didn’t need to ask because it wasn’t Lynne before me at all. Alice Liddell stood in Lynne’s place, a nervous grin on her face.

“What have you done?” I hissed grabbing her shoulders.

“Just a bit of fun is all.” She shrugged and tried to laugh it off.

How she had been able to transform into Lynne well enough to fool even me was a mystery. One that I didn’t have time to solve, but I would as soon as I found my, no doubt, heartbroken princess.

“I will deal with you later,” I snarled before running down the hill and after where Lynne had gone.

The rain was coming down harder now. As if the UnSeelie Court knew what was happening. Reaper forgive me for not listening to my gut when I got the message this morning.

I raced through the orchard and called out Lynne’s name when her form appeared in the distance. My voice only seemed to make her flee

because the next thing I knew she was gone. Not from running the other way but she disappeared altogether.

When I finally got to where she had disappeared I searched everywhere. But there was no sign of where she could have gone. Until the rain suddenly stopped.

The ground shook beneath my feet, and I had to lean against the stone wall of the orchard to keep my balance. A sick feeling filled me and I knew where she had gone.

Not bothering to let the bush let me through, I called upon my magic until it was a physical blue ball of light crackling in my hands. Blasting the ball at the bushes, I darted through them the moment there was an opening.

As I went through the hole that I had created, the bushes automatically began to grow back behind me. I shoved through the hole trying to get through before they caught up to me. The place I was going was a forbidden place. A place meant for only the direst of times. For it to let my princess through now of all times was something else entirely.

Were the gods playing with us? Could this be part of their plan? If so, I wanted no part in it. I just wanted my princess back.

I finally forced my way out of the hole and into the sanctuary of what we called the Tree of Life. The heart of the Underground, it was kept hidden from all that may try to take its fruit.

As I came into the clearing, I saw two different fruits on the ground before the tree. Both with a single bite in it. One was near the entrance and the other was next to the roots of the tree where one of them had come up like an arch to shield a form beneath it.

“Lynne!” I raced toward her body but before I could get to her, the ground took her into itself and the root of the tree settled on top of her.

“Give her back!” I screamed at the tree. I pulled my magic into my hands and blasted the tree but it didn’t even move an inch. Since the tree wasn’t going to budge for me, I focused my powers on the ground beneath the root trying with all my might to get the ground to give her back.

I poured magic into the earth until there was nothing left. The blockade in my energy kept me from going any further and using my own life force. I screamed in agony as the last of my magic faded away.

Yelling and cursing at the tree, I attacked it with my fists. I didn’t care that it was sacred. I didn’t care that I could kill everyone in the Underground. All that mattered was getting Lynne back.

“Your highness?”

The small bell-like voice called out to me ceasing my attack. Turning my back on the tree, my eyes landed on Alice. I stalked toward her, not even bothered that my hands were bleeding. It was time to get to the bottom of this.



Chapter 19

Dorian

ALICE LIDDELL SAT BEFORE me, tears glistening in her eyes but they did not move me. “I was only trying to help. The shadows said I could be one of you and I am. Look.” She tried to extend a hand out to me, but I was too blinded by my rage to give her a second glance.

The area was dim and surrounded by a stone wall, closed off to everything else except a door-shaped hole where two guards stood awaiting my command. No one came here anymore. The tree before me was sacred, and it was forbidden for anyone to touch its fruit. Not just one person but two had tasted the sweet juices from the tree.

One being the human now turned Fae before me, and the other...my eyes trailed over to the tree. My peach. How could you? Sadness filled me for a moment before my rage returned.

“I’m quite aware of your new found abilities, Alice,” I cursed causing the young girl to cringe, “did you think for a moment that the shadows could have lied? That they would tell you anything you wanted to hear? Just so you would do what they wanted?”

“But why would the shadows want to keep you apart? Surely they couldn’t care less about your marriage?” She stuttered as she tried to rationalize her actions.

“You couldn’t be more wrong.” My laugh was bitter and heavy. “They have as much invested in my marriage as I do, except I had more to lose.”

And I lost it all. My heart clenched like a troll had its hand wrapped around it and was tightly squeezing it with each breath. How could I have been so foolish? I should have realized what was happening. How was I so weak not to know the difference between real and fantasy?

“Why? What do they gain from breaking you two up?” Alice cocked her head like a child trying to understand grown-up things.

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” I hissed. I knew very well what the shadows wanted from us.

The Seelie Queen thought she was fooling everyone, but I knew what she had done. At least part of it. My mother did not keep many secrets from

me and this was one that was too important to keep.

The Faes cast out by the Seelie Queen were not happy with their sentence. They wanted to come back. To be as they once were. But they had stayed in the Shadow Realm too long. There was no going back.

I knew that my marriage to Lynne was supposed to help us fight against them when they time arose but had I known the shadows were so close I would have been more careful. Made Lynne more aware of the danger.

But it was too late now.

“And you will have plenty of time to think about the answer. Guards!” My voice rose as my anger spiked. “Everything that happens from here on out is on your shoulders.”

My words caused Alice to crumble into a heap of blue on the ground. Her cries racked her body and only grew louder when the guards wrapped their hands around her arms and dragged her away. I watched as they took her out of the area and then turned my back on her.

There was nothing left for me now. The one person I had ever truly loved was gone and the ones who had caused it was still out there. I couldn't let myself become weak again. The Underground couldn't afford for me to.

As I walked back to the palace, I came across the white roses I had been waiting to show Lynne. They had finally bloomed, and it was the perfect time to show them to her. Except she wasn't here to show.

I marched over to them intent on destroying the beautiful flowers when I saw that they weren't white at all. The edges of the petals had begun to turn red as if painted. The longer I stared at them, the more the white changed until eventually, all that was left were red roses.

The color made bile rise in my throat. Blood. They were they color of blood. Like the blood that was now on my hands. The hands that would have to tell the Seelie Queen what had happened. I could only hope that the next blood that would be spilled was my own.



MY FACE BURNED. I'D imagine that this was what it felt like to have hot pokers shoved into my face. Not that there was any physical injury.

There was no blood. Not cuts. But the swirling glyphs that now marred the left side of my face were foreign to me. As was the conversation being had while I lay on the hard marble floor of the Seelie palace.

“What are we going to do now?” the Seelie Queen hissed at my mother.

“Do not ask me. I was against this from the beginning,” my mother snapped back.

“Well, it is your son’s fault that all of our planning has been ruined in one day.” The high-pitched screech that had become the Seelie Queen’s voice caused me to wince.

I didn’t know what they were discussing. I honestly didn’t care. My heart ached almost as much as my face, and I could feel something nagging in the back of my mind trying to force its way to the forefront.

“And the human child is not to blame? You did not have to curse him. I would have made sure he was amply punished.” My mother’s eyes glanced to me with sadness. Why was she sad? This was my fault. I did this. I should be punished. If it weren’t for me my peach, my love, wouldn’t be gone.

“She’s human no longer, my cousin. A poor imitation but Fae, nonetheless. No doubt the reward for her deceit.” The Seelie Queen sniffed and crossed her arms over her chest. “I have punished her as well.”

“Taking her head is far less of a punishment than what you have done to my son!” my mother’s voice finally rose to echo off the walls of the throne room. “She may suffer, but he will suffer more and not even be able to do anything about it. Hardly fair for a royal Fae.”

“I cannot show leniency. Especially now,” the Seelie Queen tried to soothe my mother, “I understand how you feel. You are losing your son but at least he is not dead.” The weight she put on the word permeated the room.

“Yes, I suppose not.” This time my mother’s voice was small and almost fragile. Usually, I would want to go to her. My own heart aching to comfort her in her sadness, but for some reason, I couldn’t feel my usual empathy. In fact, my heart did not ache at all.

My eyes darted to the mirror the Seelie Queen had set up so I could see her work. The dark blue of my eyes had faded to a pale blue. The same exact shade as Lynne’s. A sharp pang sent pain throughout my body, and

the symbols on my face flared to life in a glare of light so bright I was blinded briefly.

“What have you done?” I could hear my mother screaming out beside me. Her hand touched my shoulder rolling me over to face her. Tears rolled down her face but instead of wanting to comfort her my lips curled up in a smile.

“As I said before, he will suffer for his grievances against the Seelie Court until we can find a replacement.” The Seelie Queen smirked, clearly happy with her choice of punishment.

“But what does that mean?” my mother asked for me. I wished to know as well but the bubbling laughter filling my chest kept me from asking.

“Your dear prince will not be able to mourn his lost love. It’s a blessing, really. He should thank me.” The cruel smile on her face did nothing to stop the laughter from falling out of me.

I jerked away from my mother’s hand and clutched my stomach. I tried to force the laughter back, to remember that I should be upset, but the more I tried to reign in the feeling the more my face burned.

“You are an evil witch,” my mother’s voice snarled as she stared down at me in disbelief.

“We all do what we have to for those we love,” was the Seelie Queen’s response. She turned from my mother and snapped her fingers at a guard. “You, call for the Cheshire and Poppy. It is their turn to serve their kingdoms.”

“Of course, your highness.”

The laughter finally dissipated, and I lay on the cold floor catching my breath. The words of the arguing royals faded away and while my face still burned from the spell, I could feel something new in my heart. An inkling that had not been there before.

This was only the beginning.



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About the Author

Erin Bedford is an otaku, recovering coffee addict, and Legend of Zelda fanatic. Her brain is so full of stories that need to be told that she must get them out or explode into a million screaming chibis. Obsessed with fairy tales and bad boys, she hasn't found a story she can't twist to match her deviant mind full of innuendos, snarky humor, and dream guys.

On the outside, she's a work from home mom and bookbinger. One the inside, she's a thirteen-year-old boy screaming to get out and tell you the pervy joke they found online. As an ex-computer programmer, she dreams of one day combining her love for writing and college credits to make the ultimate video game!

Until then, when she's not writing, Erin is devouring as many books as possible on her quest to have the biggest book gut of all time. She's written over thirty books, ranging from paranormal romance, urban fantasy, and even scifi romance.



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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Also by Erin Bedford](#)

[CHASING RABBITS](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[CHASING CATS](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[CHASING PRINCES](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[CHASING SHADOWS](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Chasing Heart](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[About the Author](#)

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